

Sketch of Dick,  
the and gallant native guide.  
Darling Depot Decb 21. 60.

# The Aboriginal Story of Burke and Wills

FORGOTTEN NARRATIVES

26 Sept  
27.28  
Scots  
Orohipo.  
water hole  
24 Sep.

Sketch of robes  
from Balranald  
roughly drawn by head retouching  
by Ludwig  
26 Sep.

Edited by Ian D. Clark and Fred Cahir

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University of Ballarat  
Learn to succeed



PUBLISHING



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# Foreword

Few episodes in Australia's history have received as much attention as the Victorian Exploring Expedition of 1860–61. Over 40 books, hundreds of paintings, several films, poems, music, numerous public memorials and sculptures have all celebrated or commemorated the exploits and fate of Burke and Wills. From the contemporary newspaper campaigns of the 1860s, through the Commission of Inquiry, Frank Clune and Alan Moorehead to Tim Bonyhady and Sarah Murgatroyd, authors in successive generations have sought to explain, and in many cases to attribute blame for, the outcome of that expedition.

The Burke and Wills Anniversary Advisory Committee, established by the Royal Society of Victoria in 2008, identified major deficiencies in the existing histories. Remarkably, no book had been written about the scientific achievements of the Victoria Exploring Expedition. Nor had any in-depth study been made of the interaction between Indigenous people and the expeditioners and their potential and actual contribution to the expedition. We were determined to rectify this through two sesquicentenary projects.

The first project culminated in the publication by CSIRO Publishing of *Burke and Wills: The Scientific Legacy of the Victorian Exploring Expedition*. This notable work has changed the thinking about the scientific achievements of the expedition.

In its endeavours to ensure that the Indigenous contribution to the VEE was given proper consideration, the Royal Society of

Victoria was fortunate in forming a liaison with Professor Ian Clark and Dr Fred Cahir from the University of Ballarat. Their previous work on Aboriginal history and place names was an essential prerequisite for the task. The University of Ballarat and the Royal Society of Victoria were then successful in obtaining an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant to undertake the project. As part of the project, in November 2011, the University of Ballarat hosted a symposium at which it became clear that we had raised subjects that were long overdue for examination.

In creating this book Professor Clark and Dr Cahir have brought together participants at the symposium, including members of the project team at the University of Ballarat. The authors include scholars who have made extensive and notable contributions to our understanding of Indigenous people, their language and their relationship to the land.

The introduction provided by Aaron Paterson, a Yandruwandha descendant, sets the scene for the examination of the interactions between the Yandruwandha people and Burke's party at Cooper Creek. Other records of oral histories also provide insights into the Aboriginal understanding at the time.

The authors of this book provide linguistic and anthropological evidence which reminds us that, far from being *terra nullius*, even the most arid areas were populated by Aboriginal communities interlinked by language and protocols and tradition. Although the linguistic material gathered by the explorers

was limited, it provides evidence of the path the expedition took as it moved through the areas occupied by different language groups.

A central theme of this book is the contrast between the skills, perceptions and knowledge of the Indigenous people and those of the new arrivals, and the extent to which this affected the outcome of the expedition. The very varied backgrounds of the expedition members provide an opportunity to consider differing perceptions of the Indigenous people, their capability and their communication skills and their knowledge. The diary notes and reports prepared by members of the expedition provide material by which the different world views of the varied expedition members may be gauged.

Of particular importance were the German scientists Ludwig Becker and Hermann Beckler (and for part of the journey Georg Neumayer). Steeped in the Humboldtian tradition, they had particular interest in understanding the land and its people. Their carefully illustrated and documented observations were gathered in spite of Burke, rather than because of him. As author Peta Jeffries suggests, Becker's background and artistic sensitivity may have attuned him to the task of bridging the divide between the different cultures. Their attitudes may also have been influenced by Becker's previous contact with Tasmanian Aborigines and the fact that the Germans were themselves aliens in a British colony.

It is inescapable that this book is concerned not only with the Indigenous people and the explorers but with the land itself, and the different attitudes to the land held by the different cultures. To the Aboriginal people their country was their dwelling place. Through their skills in navigation, hunting and gathering, honed over millennia, their country provided their sustenance and was integral to their being.

As Professor Harry Allen says in Chapter 7:

*Aboriginal people living in the areas traversed by the explorers were at home. They were surrounded by kin*

*and possessed intellectual tools capable of explaining the presence of strange humans and animals. The geographical and mythological territory they inhabited was familiar to them. It was the Europeans who were out of place, anxious, aggressive, bristling with arms and ready to use them.*

To the new, brash and confident colony of Victoria in the 1860s, the country to the north represented territory to conquer and if possible to exploit. The fact that the land was already occupied by Aboriginal peoples was apparently not of great significance. The Victorian Exploring Expedition was sent forth to cross the continent, equipped with specially imported camels and supplied (probably oversupplied) with goods and stores calculated to make it independent of the country it would traverse, but regrettably underequipped with a real understanding of the task it faced. The instructions to the expeditioners did not oblige them to gain an understanding of the world of the Indigenous people nor to utilise their skills and knowledge of the country.

To Burke, the leader, the expedition offered a stage for glory and heroic endeavour. The inland was a place to be conquered. In passing through it he would rely on his supplies and the introduced animals which carried them, supplemented by whatever sustenance his firearms could bring.

As the authors of this book make clear, the Aboriginal skills in communication, in tracking and in navigation which were recognised and utilised by other explorers, both before and after the Burke and Wills expedition, were apparently not recognised by Burke. On the contrary, he perceived the presence of the Indigenous people as a hindrance and potentially a threat to the survival of his party and the success of his mission. Reliance on pack animals and the supplies they carried resulted in constant anxiety. Any loss of supplies or animals or injury to a member of the party was a threat



to the survival of the expeditioners, whose supply lines were frail or non-existent.

In particular, the members of the party who travelled to the Cooper and the Gulf had little appreciation or understanding of the capabilities of the Indigenous peoples. As a consequence, when the supplies they carried were exhausted and their animals failed, several of the men died.

Perhaps also because the margin between survival and death was so fine, we cannot help but feel that even a slightly greater respect for the knowledge and capability of the local Aboriginal people might have tipped the balance.

The contrasting perceptions of the land as provider, the land as a resource to be exploited and the land as threat run through

Australia's early history. The Burke and Wills expedition is a notable example, in part because the expedition covered so much territory and in part because its leadership was even less attuned to the capability of Indigenous people than most expeditions.

However, in our assessment of Burke we might reflect that he had been in the colony for only a short time and that we as a nation, 150 years later, still have difficulties in reconciling differing perceptions of our land and of its traditional owners.

This publication of this book is a milestone in an ongoing project. It will contribute to our understanding of our past and present relationship with this harsh yet fragile land and the people it sustained for countless millennia.

Dr Peter Thorne  
Vice-President, The Royal Society of Victoria  
Chair, Burke and Wills Commemoration  
Committee

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Finally, we believe we have created a book which offers new perspectives on the story of Burke and Wills, and more importantly acknowledges the Aboriginal contribution to the Victorian Exploring Expedition and the subsequent relief expeditions. The Aboriginal story is complex and multi-faceted with many interconnected threads – we trust that the threads that we tease out in this book contribute to a greater appreciation of the central role that Aboriginal people played in the exploration of Australia, and in particular their role in the Burke and Wills expedition. We look forward to the continued reassessment of the Aboriginal story of Burke and Wills.

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# Introduction: a Yandruwandha perspective

## *Kindred spirits and Yandruwandha country: a Yandruwandha perspective in 2013 on the Burke and Wills Expedition*

### Aaron Paterson (Yandruwandha descendant)

Wandering through the trees beside an ancient creek in the early morning or later afternoon makes me really come alive as I glimpse the long shadows of afternoon as the coolness sets in and the flies disappear, prompting me to get my fire started. I grab a stick and walk to the previous night's fire and move the ashes around, then place dry leaves and coolabah seeds on the hot coals and blow them to life by fanning them with a sheet of bark. My store of green leaves is close by in readiness for the first sting of a *koonti* (mosquito) – the smoke will be my repellent tonight should I require it.

I get the fish I have gutted ready, then place them in the coals to one side to bake them. Catfish, yellowbelly and bony bream, and some mussels pulled out of the mud in the water at the edge of *Inimingka* waterhole. I listen to the hundreds of galahs, cockatiels and cockatoos screeching, some with ear-piercing annoyance, bustling in the tree branches and hollows, looking for their own camp spot for the night. They are there to remind me that I don't need to set my alarm clock out here in the desert paradise we Yandruwandha people call *Kinipapa* and the rest of the world calls 'Cooper Creek'.

Having the ability to speak from my heart does not require me to hold a university degree though I wish I did possess one as someone might take me seriously one of these days. But comfort in the knowledge that my people lived here and still come here over and over again is one of the greatest satisfactions in my life. The Yandruwandha

people of old lived their lives according to a system of rules, some simple and some complex. The basic rule was 'respect/protect'.

As my fish are cooking I look over my shoulder to the creek to watch the golden reflection of the sunset across the creek in the west. I note the *nharramindji* (freshwater tortoise) precariously perched on a dead log in the water. He seems to be looking at his own reflection but I am not sure, I only know that if I wanted I could try and catch him for breakfast in the morning.

As a Yandruwandha man I am proud that although I may not practise every single custom or method of hunting and gathering I do understand what most of them involve. I possess the skills to utilise many of them and carry the responsibility of passing them down to our younger Yandruwandha people.

If someone sees you 'in the middle of nowhere' talking to yourself, they might think you are a few bob short of a quid, but we Yandruwandha people are encouraged to do so when visiting our country to announce our arrival to the *ngapitja* (old spirits) to ensure a happy, safe and harmonious time on country. When Yandruwandha people in 1861 found the poor men who were the remnant of the Burke and Wills party roaming around apparently aimlessly, they felt they were lost either in mind or spirit. The Burke and Wills party did not know how to communicate effectively with their surrounds, utilise the resources at their fingertips or share their intentions with the native people with whom they came into contact.

Bemusement between one person and another can lead to suspicion, resentment and a further lack of respect, resulting in a parting of the ways. Such was the case with the Yandruwandha people who only wanted to help the men with Burke along the creek. Seeing no reciprocity of kindness the Yandruwandha did not attack, although they did warn in no uncertain terms that you followed certain behaviours in a proactive fashion. Seeing this was not effective, they then chose to extricate themselves from the company of the men whom they were trying to assist.

To the Yandruwandha men of authority, William John Wills was seen as friendly and engaging and apparently a good listener to their stories. Wills himself recorded several Yandruwandha words in pencil in his diaries, which shows he did pay attention to what he was told. In Yandruwandha custom an uninitiated man would not be allowed to sleep in the same *walpa* (humpie) as initiated men; he was shown a *walpi* where he could sleep with as yet uninitiated young men. If this was apparent to Wills I cannot say. He must have made a good impression on the Yandruwandha family group with whom he spent several days before being loaded up with fish and food to take back to his *ngumbuli* (mates). One thing Wills did not possess was the understanding that Yandruwandha people, like all other Aboriginal people on the Australian continent, never stayed in one place for long periods. They stayed only until it was decided that moving camp to a fresh place with fresh resources would allow places where they camped previously to be rejuvenated and visited again at a later date.

There was a whole host of reasons why the blacks of Cooper Creek mentioned in Wills' diary moved away from their campsites. A death occurring in the camp would require the place to be deserted and not revisited. A death somewhere else might require their attendance for funeral purposes if the deceased had been a totemic group

relative, meaning they were the possessors of the deceased's totemic songs and were the people who must preside over the burial and mourning rituals. Runners were often used to transport news to other groups that their attendance was required to discuss ceremonial issues such as initiation, increase ceremonies, marriage, dispute settling such as a *pinya* (revenge party) formed to punish murderers or anyone accused of being involved with the death of someone. The expedition leader Burke's negative interaction (or his 'no help wanted' mentality) certainly may have played a part in why a friendly group of natives might move away. It might also have been considered by my old people that simply moving away from Burke's party might send a clear message to them that they needed to move on?

Although this incursion by others in Thayipilthirringuda land gave an outlet for discussion other than the usual, my old people went about as they always did, principally carrying on as usual in the way they knew, their emotions, feelings of distrust and bewilderment at why men who came from somewhere else could do no more than wander about like ghosts aimlessly up and down the creek in their homeland. It is plain and understandable that the sense of responsibility would be no greater than any human interaction towards another in trouble.

History does not record nor did John King mention that while camped with the Yandruwandha family group of my great-great-great-grandad Kimi for three and a half months, another party of natives arrived at their camp and, having seen King in their midst, argued that he should not be allowed to live and should be clubbed or speared. My old people told this other party of natives to leave and to say no more about the *walypala* (whitefella) who had come into their care.

John King's daughter was a result of his sexual liaison with a Yandruwandha woman of my great-great-great-grandad's family

group – others in the family group know of it. When this woman gave birth long after King's departure with Alfred William Howitt's relief expedition the child had to be protected as she was a *padlaka pirtipirti* (red body). This child grew up with her mother and ended up living at Nappamerrie Station across the border some 70 km to the east of Innamincka, on the Queensland side. The child's European name was Alice King. She ended up being a promised wife to a Yandruwandha man and they later had a child named Annie. Annie also grew up at Nappamerrie Station when John Conrick was station manager. She had two children to a white stockman at Nappamerrie named Robert Parker – a son called Yellow Bob Parker (aka Barioolah Bob, native name Punbili) and his sister Nelly Parker (native name, Timpika). Nelly's first husband was Benny Kerwin, and Benny and Nelly are my mother's grandparents. Their children were Lenny Kerwin, Edna Kerwin (my maternal grandmother), Benny Kerwin Jnr and Jack Guttie [Kerwin]. King Wilpie of Innamincka and sandhills of Coongie is the older full blood half-brother of my great grandad Benny Kerwin. I am also a relative of King Peter of Nappamerrie (his sister Cora Parker is my great-great-grandmother).

In south-east central Australia lies my people's country, known to us as *padla* or 'ground'. In the centre lies an ancient creek called by Yandruwandha people *Kinipapa* and known by Europeans as Cooper Creek. It is estimated to be 1522 km long, starting at Windorah in Queensland where two large rivers, the Barcoo and Thompson, meet at a junction which becomes 'the Cooper'.

Robert O'Hara Burke led a mob of his countrymen into our country and set up a camp beside a coolibah tree on the Cooper. He would not have known that our Yandruwandha people held the belief that the ancient coolibahs were our ancient ancestors. Anyone in his camp who put pencil to paper might had jotted down in annoyance that our people were continually watching

their activities, that the natives or blacks hung around. The old people would have wondered what these fellows were doing carving into an old coolibah tree.

It would not have occurred to these strangers on Yandruwandha traditional lands and waters that they were breaching a series of customary protocols. Some were simple ones, such as announcing their arrival at a distance, waiting for an invitation to enter camp and waiting for a spot to be picked out where they could camp. If they had followed these then no rules could have been broken and a strong level of trust would have been developed. Instead, both groups were suspicious of the other's true intent.

The Yandruwandha people would have believed that the strangers (*thudlali*) were indeed 'strange' for not knowing how to follow protocol, which in Yandruwandha terms was so basic, so simple to understand and which had been honed over millennia, reinforced by dire physical consequences for breaching. It is surprising even today to think that our old people did not attack Burke's party.

Fifteen years earlier the adult members of the Yandruwandha people would have seen their first horses and Europeans when Charles Sturt entered their country. He noted their lack of fear when he went over a sandhill and looked down to see several hundred natives gathered on a swale – the men held coolamons of water up to his horses to drink from.

Compassion among the Yandruwandha could be either exceedingly strong or greatly lacking, depending on the circumstances. Benny Kerwin's grandad and his people offered fish and *nardoo*, other native foods, to Burke, Wills and King only to be treated disrespectfully. Despite this they still gave food, they still watched from a distance and when they saw John King languishing they came to his rescue, thinking they were only going to assist him to find out where his mates were. A native either alone or in company with others of their group



apparently broke a rule by interfering with Wills' body or possessions. This was purported to have occurred after King left with Burke to look for our people. Stealing from a person is a heinous crime in Yandruwandha custom, but taking something without permission and leaving something of equal value in its place is not! A person who committed an offence against anyone within a family group could suffer punishment of a period of banishment, be assaulted (fractured skull, broken bones) from a boomerang blow, or killed as payback. Such was the severity of Indigenous laws that there was rarely stealing or other tribal rules broken. Today our fear of punishment or reprimand has decreased due to factors such as non-life-threatening or physical punishment, and the introduction of alcohol

and illicit substances has further inhibited our moral values.

The true volume of European–Aboriginal interaction in Australian history has yet to be unearthed and perhaps one day the Yandruwandha story, if more widely known, may show other Australians, whether grassroots or scholars, that a simple sit down and talk around a warm fire and sharing food opens understanding and appreciation of other people's points of view. At least for me to have had the opportunity to not only meet Richie Howitt, whose ancestor's story is directly linked to my ancestor's story, is an honour for me and being able to say to anyone that 'Richard Howitt is my good mate!' gives me great pride. A collaboration of kindred spirits from different walks of life is a perfect example of what truly is Australian!

## *Responding to Yandruwandha: a contemporary Howitt's experience*

### Richie Howitt (a Howitt descendant)

John King and Alfred Howitt were common presences in my childhood imaginaries. They were built from fragments in childhood history books and the images they used to illustrate the stories. Because I shared a name with one of them, there was a sense of connection – a sense that this was ordinary history, being lived by ordinary people like those I knew in my ordinary life. And like so much of my ordinary life, this imaginary was somehow mostly devoid of Aboriginal people. There were glimpses, to be sure, of unknown others in the background and in childhood play I talked with them, never knowing they were not generic 'Aborigines' but rather Yandruwandha people – people with their own realities and imaginaries that were robust enough to encounter these ordinary others in the shape of King and Howitt, and move on. Growing up in working-class Sydney in the 1950s and 1960s, I was a long way removed from *Kinipapa* in space and time as well as social distance. Yet the ghosts of Cooper Creek were perhaps never too far from my path.

Elsewhere I have recounted the profound personal and intellectual impact of some of my own engagements with the persistent presence of the Indigenous in Australian landscapes (Howitt 2011), but in working with Native Title claimants in South Australia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I met a young Aaron Paterson and his family, who were involved in Native Title claims and drawn into statewide discussions to consider negotiating settlement of Native

Title with the state government. Aaron's family decided I looked like the better-known Howitt and gave me his name to carry – *Mangili* (sand goanna). I was flattered and a little embarrassed. I certainly looked more like a wombat than a goanna and, while I felt comfortable with the Yandruwandha families, it took time to explore the links in the complex political terrain of the South Australian Native Title processes (Agius et al 2004, 2007).

Aaron's powerful discussion above of the ways in which Yandruwandha hospitality to John King has echoed in the everyday histories and geographies of Yandruwandha people differs greatly from the more detached and analytical reflections of other authors in this important collection. And in our own friendship, Aaron and I recapture both some elements of that uncommon moment in 1861 and the subsequent sweep of history that has so long obscured and ignored the Yandruwandha presence in the Burke and Wills stories, and the Aboriginal presence in all Australian landscapes.

This volume goes a long way in recognising that the Burke and Wills story took place in the cultural landscapes of Aboriginal peoples. It was never simply a failed colonial expedition; nor did Howitt's rescue of King occur in a simply hostile and alien landscape. As Aaron suggests, our friendship points to the persistence of both colonial and Yandruwandha stories in contemporary Australian landscapes and their links to earlier connections in

which there are everyday stories of racism, opportunism and erasure – addressed in this volume.

Australia's geographical imagination and historical memory have both been shaped by narratives of absence, erasure and denial (Howitt 2012). This volume takes important steps in the effort of scholarship to avoid discursive re-inscription of these narrative fictions on contemporary understanding of the Burke and Wills story as an element of the settlement of Indigenous Australia. In the company of such scholarship, the Yandruwandha presence in this volume remains slim and easily elided. We have here careful and authoritative explorations of the ways in which the Aboriginal presences in the historical accounts are to be understood and accounted for. In this setting, Aaron's account might be dismissed as if he were "in the middle of nowhere" talking to himself'. Yet in this juxtaposition, we see much of what constitutes the contemporary challenge to scholars of Australian landscapes. Aaron invites an engagement with *Kinipapa* and its peoples. It invites recognition and sharing. It emphasises the smell, taste and feel of country, and the pleasure of being in country rather than reading (or writing) about it. It reminds us that the ancestors who are, to use Marcia Langton's (2002) memorable phrase, 'beyond the edge of death', remain in place and enliven contemporary social and environmental relations.

In Aaron's account, there is no need to trouble with the reasons why Yandruwandha were increasingly deleted from Howitt's accounts of their encounter, because in the Yandruwandha narrative they could not be erased or denied, because they were the hosts, they were the carers, they were the diplomats and messengers, they were present. It was their story, and Burke and Wills, King and Howitt, wandered (or blundered) into it and out of it – as so many others have blundered into and out of Indigenous lives since.

Aaron's families and Yandruwandha countrymen continue to narrate their presence and it is high time that we accept the hospitality they offer in telling these stories of belonging-together-in-country. These are stories that have parallels in many places. Each challenges the narrative dominance of the legatees of colonial and postcolonial erasure of Aboriginal rights and ongoing denial of racism and constructions of Indigenous absence in Australian landscapes. Each of the chapters presented here offers a new opportunity to recognise and respond to what Henry Reynolds (1981) so powerfully referred to as 'the other side of the frontier', and to recognise that the narratives that have shaped the Burke and Wills stories both reflect and construct Australian imaginaries and realities to this day.

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# The Aboriginal legacy of the Burke and Wills Expedition: an introduction

*Ian D. Clark and Fred Cahir*

The Aboriginal story of the Burke and Wills Expedition and relief expeditions is at once multi-faceted and complex with many interconnected threads that have rarely been teased out in historical analyses. In many respects the Aboriginal story has been overshadowed by the tragedy and misfortune of the expedition in which seven men, including Burke and Wills, died. Yet the exclusion of Aboriginal perspectives is a structural matter, as epitomised in Moorehead's analysis. The description of central Australia as a 'ghastly blank' (Moorehead 1963, p. 1) where the land was 'absolutely untouched and unknown, and except for the blacks, the most retarded people on earth, there was no sign of any previous civilization whatever', is representative of the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the narrative and if Aboriginal people are discussed, it is often in racist

tones. As Allen (2011, p. 245) rightly pointed out:

*To a certain extent, the Aborigines were classified by the Europeans as part of nature rather than culture, as being located within a landscape which itself was conceived as being empty and primordial, where European exploration brought the land into existence and formed a starting point for Australian history. However, the explorers were passing through lands that had resident Aboriginal populations, territories that were already mapped and named. In considering the interior of Australia empty, the explorers were unaware of the fact that the land, its waterholes, animals and plants, were charged with cultural and mythological meaning, and that unseen boundaries were constantly being crossed.*



The Aboriginal story is concerned with the bushcraft of expedition members and their flawed use of Aboriginal ecological knowledge; it is the story of the Aboriginal guide Dick who ensured that trooper Lyons and McPherson did not perish at Torowoto; it is the Yandruwandha adoption of John King and the colonial response in thanking these people with gifts that included breastplates and the establishment of a reserve for Moravian missionary activity on the Cooper; it is the contribution of various members of the original expedition and relief parties to knowledge of Aboriginal societies and the development of anthropology; and it is Yandruwandha and other Aboriginal oral histories of the expedition including one that concerned the death of Burke (see Figure 1.1). The authors of the chapters in this book have found that the historical records concerning the Burke and Wills Expedition and subsequent relief expeditions are capable of yielding a considerable quarry of material from which Indigenous perspectives can be gleaned. It follows that the barriers that have for so long kept Indigenous perspectives out of the Burke and Wills story were based not on lack of material but rather on perception and choice. A literary curtain has been drawn across Burke and Wills historiography since the early 20th century – Indigenous perspectives have been seen as peripheral to the central task of the historical writings. With this publication we are pleased to contribute to a re-emergence – Indigenous Australians who had been ‘out’ of the Burke and Wills story for over a century are now returning to centre stage. It needs to be acknowledged that while much of this ‘new’ evidence is derived from non-Indigenous exploration records, it has also been possible to uncover Aboriginal perspectives in those records that complement Aboriginal oral histories.

In the 1960s Australian historians were criticised for being the ‘high priests’ of a cult of forgetfulness, for neglecting Aboriginal history and for excluding a whole quadrant

of the landscape from their research. The same criticisms may be levelled at much of the recent historical study of the Burke and Wills Expedition, despite the richness of the Aboriginal side of this story. Yet this was not always the case. During the expedition’s jubilee years (1861–1911), Indigenous peoples occupied an important place in historical accounts of the Expedition. In the title of this book we emphasise this point through the use of the subtitle ‘forgotten narratives’. Aboriginal people and Aboriginal themes were more prominent in early writings compared with later 20th-century histories. This is particularly evident in the flourish of publications around the centenary years (Fitzpatrick 1963; Hogg 1961; McLaren 1960, 1962; Moorehead 1963; Southall 1961), which are remarkable for the fact that although they are keen to discuss what went wrong with the expedition, they are relatively silent on Aboriginal people. The basic truths about exploration that were evident to contemporary commentators such as William Lockhart Morton, Marcus Clarke, George Rusden and Henry Turner had been left out of the studies that emerged at the time of the centenary celebrations. Taking Ian McLaren’s (1960, pp. 235–236) analysis as representative of this excision, we can see that he neglects to include Aboriginal themes in his summary of the tragedies and mistakes that caused the death of seven expedition members. While recent studies have begun to consider the contribution of some of the scientific members of the expedition and subsequent relief expeditions to the broader field of Aboriginal studies (Tipping 1979; Taylor 1983; Bonyhady 1991; Beckler 1993; Allen 2011), there has not yet been any systematic attempt to construct an Aboriginal history of the expeditions.

Jan Fullerton, the Director-General of the National Library of Australia in 2002, considered the Burke and Wills transcontinental expedition to be ‘one of Australia’s great stories. The deaths of seven members of the exploration party,

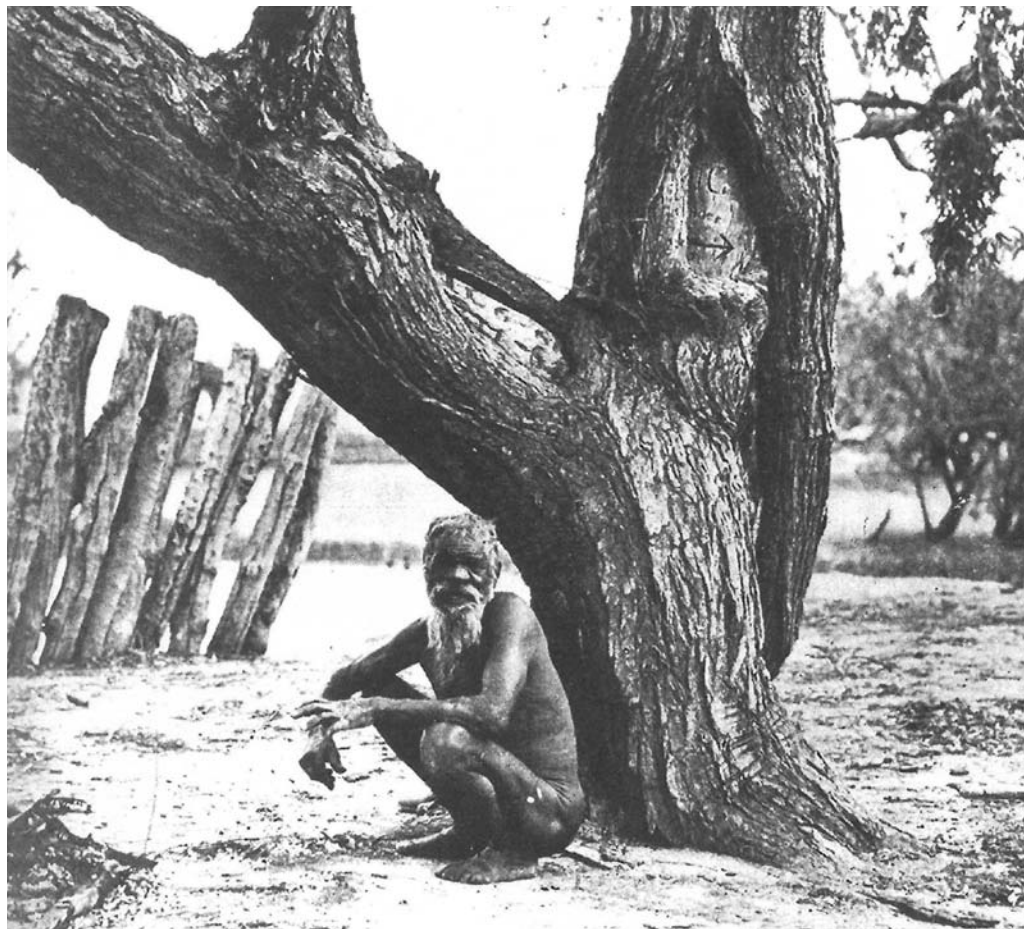


Figure 1.1: 'Memento of the Burke and Wills Expedition: William Brahe's tree, Cooper's Creek, 1911'. *Sydney Mail*, 11 October 1911, p. 33. National Library of Australia.

According to Bonyhady (1991, p. 275) this is a 'photograph originally published in the *Sydney Mail* in 1911, showing the site of the depot camp on Cooper's Creek with the tree marked by the explorers, an Aboriginal man said to have been "a young tribesman at the time of the expedition", and the remains of the stockade built by Brahe and his companions'. Aaron Paterson (pers. comm. 15 September 2012) noted that this Yandruwandha man was known as 'Baltie' and that he spoke a dialect of Yandruwandha known as Parlpa.madra.madra ('stony tongue' or 'heavy tongue'). He died at Karmona Station, which was once part of Nappamerrie Station.

despite the expedition achieving its goal of reaching the Gulf of Carpentaria, have been transformed in the past 150 years into a national myth of heroic endeavour' (Bonyhady 2002, p. iii). Tim Bonyhady (2002, pp. 6–7) argued that, apart from the bushranger Ned Kelly, no other colonial figures have loomed as large in Australian culture: 'While successive generations have focussed on very different aspects of the expedition and assessed it very differently,

they have never lost interest in it. The very complexity of the expedition, always the stuff of conflicting accounts, has made it ripe for interpretation and reinterpretation'. Marcus Clarke (1877, pp. 201f) took the view that the expedition was part of:

*... a most glorious era in history of Australian discovery. Within two years of the death of the leaders from starvation on Cooper's Creek, tierces of*

*beef were displayed in an intercolonial exhibition at Melbourne, salted down from cattle pasturing on the spot where they perished! Settlement has followed their track right across the continent ... But it is sad to think that a few forgotten fishhooks would have preserved their lives. It is lamentable to read of the blunders of some, the gross neglect of others, and of the series of appalling disasters which followed from inexperience, incapacity, and rashness.*

Ernest Favenc (1908, p. 186) considered the Burke and Wills expedition was 'of greater notoriety than that of any similar enterprise in the annals of Australia'. Ernest Scott (1928, p. 231) noted that the Burke and Wills story is one of the most famous of Australian inland exploratory enterprises, and that the 'éclat with which it started and the tragedy of its ending have invested it with an atmosphere of romance'.

Roy Bridges (1934, p. 367) argued that they 'won undying fame not less by tragedy than by achievement'. The Historical Subcommittee of the Centenary Celebrations Council (1934, p. 214), in its historical survey of Victoria's first century, noted that although 'the continent was crossed by a remnant of the party, dissensions, faulty leadership and organisation, want of tact, foresight, and judgement, ignorance of bushcraft and pitiful blundering, joined to a series of fatalities resulting from divided forces and faulty communication and contact, made it a tragedy in which seven lives were lost'. Colwell (1985, p. 9) commented that while Burke succeeded in crossing the continent, he 'discovered that the limitless arid regions, the natural home of Aboriginal food gatherers and hunters, denied life to white men unable to capitalise on the shifting pockets of wild life and fickle water holes'.

Early histories of the expedition include Andrew Jackson's (1862) historical account, Puttmann (1862), Foster (1863), Grad (1864), Pyke (1907), Watson (1911), Birtles (1935), Dow (1937) and Frank Clune's (1937) Dig: A

*Drama of Central Australia*. The centenary of the expedition in 1961 produced a number of historical revisions including Oakley's (1959) short story 'O'Hara 1861', McLaren's (1960) essay, Garry Hogg's (1961) *With Burke and Wills across Australia*, McKellar's (1961) *Tree by the Creek*, Ivan Southall's (1961) *Journey into Mystery*, Alan Moorehead's (1963) *Cooper's Creek* and Kathleen Fitzpatrick's (1963) lecture 'The Burke and Wills Expedition'. Writing about the Aboriginal people of the Torowoto district, Southall (1961, p. 40) explained to his readers that they 'were very primitive, but they knew how to kill. They were brave and skilful hunters and they no more trusted the white man than the white man trusted them'.

Several authors have published accounts of their attempts to retrace the tracks of Burke and Wills, in particular Thallon (1966), Judge and Scherschel (1979) and Bergin (1981). Bergin's retracing is of interest as he enlisted the services of two Aboriginal guides to accompany him on his journey, Nugget Gnalkenga, a Pitjantjatjara chilbi (elder) and an experienced cameleer, and Frankie Gnalkenga, his Arunda son. Recent histories include Bonyhady (1991) and Murgatroyd (2009). Bonyhady's (2002) catalogue was published to accompany an exhibition staged at the National Library of Australia. There have also been studies of particular members of the expedition, such as Ludwig Becker (Blanchen 1978; Tipping 1978a,b, 1979, 1991; Heckenberg 2006; Edmond 2009), Hermann Beckler (Voigt 1991; Beckler 1993), King (McKellar 1944; Attwood 2003; Turnbull 2011) and Wills (McLaren 1962; Van der Kiste 2011). Joyce and McCann (2011) edited a volume exploring the scientific legacy of the expedition.

Many of the early histories of Victoria and Australia were concerned with the tragedy and misfortune of the expedition which saw the death of seven members, including Burke and Wills. Many sought explanations for the demise of Burke and Wills and put the blame on poor choices, human failings

or simply 'bad luck'. With the exception of Henry Turner (1904) and George Rusden (1897), who considered the decision not to take Aboriginal guides and the expedition's inexperience in dealing with Aboriginal people were critical factors in its demise, most early commentators focused on other issues. Some critics argued that Burke and Wills should have been able to survive at Cooper Creek: 'where untutored Aborigines were able to pick up a living' with their spears and stone tomahawks, a 'white man should not starve with his rifle and iron one' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 218).

Rusden thought that Burke lacked the kindly fatherly control needed to win the affection of the native race, and lamented that the expedition was 'unaccompanied by an Australian native whose skill as a hunter would have spared the carried food for emergencies' (Rusden 1897, vol. 3, p. 112). Turner (1904, vol. 2, p. 105) took the view that Burke, as leader, 'proved to be deficient in the necessary qualifications of tact and patience' and that he 'knew nothing of bush-craft or surveying, and was without any experience in dealing with the aborigines'. Although Aboriginal guides were usefully employed at various stages between the Darling and the Bulloo rivers they were not taken on to Cooper Creek. Between the Bulloo River and Cooper Creek, expeditioners sought to avoid contact with Aboriginal groups they met along the way and reached for their guns when Aboriginal people attempted to interact with them. On their journey to the Gulf of Carpentaria and back to Cooper Creek, Burke and Wills came to appreciate the value of Aboriginal tracks and wells, but they continued to resist Aboriginal attempts at communication. Reynolds (1990, p. 11) noted that Burke and Wills learnt the value of following Aboriginal tracks when returning from Carpentaria; floundering in a bog they came upon a hard, well-trodden path which led them out of the swamp and on to drinking water and yam grounds. Just after leaving the Cooper

Creek depot 'A large tribe of blacks came pestering us to go to their camp and have a dance, which we declined. They were very troublesome, and nothing but the threat to shoot them will keep them away ... from the little we have seen of them, they appear to be mean-spirited and contemptible in every respect' (Wills 1863, pp. 179–180). According to Brahe, who had been left in charge of the depot at Cooper Creek, the instructions from Burke, concerning the Aborigines, were that if any annoyed the depot they were to be shot at once.

Henry Reynolds (1990, p. 33) believed that a fundamental shortcoming of the expedition was its failure to profit from Aboriginal expertise; he considered this surprising given the widespread private use of Aboriginal guides in all parts of the continent from the earliest years of settlement. In the last few weeks of their lives, when Burke and Wills attempted to live like the Aborigines, they learnt too late one of the basic truths of Australian exploration. John Greenway (1972, p. 142) called the Burke and Wills tragedy 'an impossible truth'. Colwell (1985, p. 71) mused that when Burke, Wills, Gray and King were *en route* to the gulf they were 'never far from inquisitive human eyes'.

*What the Central Australian Aborigines thought of the lumbering evil-smelling camels and their strange white attendants will never be known. Their territory and possibly sacred ground was being invaded by creatures who carried strange weapons and spoke in a mysterious tongue ... The Cooper's Creek natives may or may not have encountered other explorers, but even if they had not, they soon realized that the intruders were indeed human. Their halting progress and amateurish attempts to interpret the signs of nature gave them away as men who were struggling to survive in a strange environment.*

Colwell's assertion that Aboriginal perspectives of the expedition and its camels will never be known is symptomatic



of historical writings that have excluded Aboriginal voices. As this book shows, it is possible to learn Aboriginal perspectives, both during the time of the expedition and more recently. In recent histories, if the authors had only spoken with the descendants of the Aboriginal families who interacted with the expedition they would have gained unique perspectives into the well-known story.

## Bushcraft and Aboriginal ecological knowledge

Bonyhady (1991, p. 311) observed that ‘More than any other event in nineteenth-century Australia, the deaths of Burke and Wills at Cooper’s Creek have come to represent both the unwillingness of Europeans to learn from the Aborigines and their more general inability to understand the land’. He also noted (Bonyhady 2002, p. 27) that the Exploration Committee established by the Royal Society of Victoria showed no interest in asking the expedition to collect Aboriginal cultural materials. Ludwig Becker, when he applied to join the party, wanted to be its ‘ethnographer’ as well as its artist, zoologist and geologist but the committee ignored his Indigenous interests. Yet the failure of the expedition to utilise Aboriginal bush craft in any concerted way cannot be entirely due to the expedition members’ lack of experience. Ian Clark, in Chapter 2, undertakes a biographical analysis of the bush experience of the 30 men who at various times were members of the Victorian Exploring Expedition. Its aim is to quantify and analyse the experience that each member was known to have had with Aboriginal people prior to joining the expedition. It shows that it is overly simplistic to suggest that every member of the expedition was unsuited to the task of exploration. Twelve men had bush experience – Becker, Beckler, Cowen, Drakeford, Ferguson and Fletcher, who were part of the original expedition, and Bowman, Gray, Purcell, Stone and Wright and presumably Smith who joined the expedition

as it travelled northwards. Some 10 members had some experience of interaction with Aboriginal peoples – Wills, Becker, Beckler, Cowen, Bowman, Ferguson, Wright, Stone, Purcell and Smith. Smith, a man of Aboriginal descent, was hired by Wright at Menindee. Five of the seven men who died during the expedition – Becker, Gray, Purcell, Stone, Patten, Burke and Wills – had varying degrees of bush experience and some experience of dealing with Aboriginal people; Burke and Patten were the exceptions, who had possessed neither.

Ian Clark, in Chapter 3, extends this discussion through an analysis of William Lockhart Morton’s contemporary critique that the various expedition members should have possessed sufficient bush craft to have survived the expedition and that they should have been able to have lived as well as local Aboriginal people. A second contemporary critique, that the expedition should have included Aboriginal guides as expedition members from its beginning, is also presented. It is often unspoken, but nevertheless remarkable in terms of stark contrast, that where members of the expedition were dying Aboriginal families were living in abundance. Indeed, when Howitt arrived at the Cooper he identified many sources of food including fish, yabbies, mussels and birds such as pigeons.

In Chapter 4, Philip Clarke discusses the importance of knowledge transfer – especially the transfer of landscape-based knowledge from Indigenous occupants to European travellers. He concludes that if the explorers had gained greater intelligence of local plant foods and their preparation, they may well have avoided sickness and death. Greater knowledge of the climate cycles of the interior may have tempered Burke’s decision to make a dash to the Gulf. As shown in the dramatic events surrounding the rescue of trooper Lyons and McPherson at Torowoto, the presence of Aboriginal guides with an understanding of regional languages would have helped with the communication

of ecological knowledge to the stranded explorers at Cooper Creek. Clarke argues that if Burke, Wills, Gray and King had an experienced guide, such as Dick, the chances that all of them would have survived may have been significantly greater.

## Perspectives on the expedition and its results

Analysis of Aboriginal interaction with the expedition must be broken into several phases. The first phase concerns the expedition travelling from Melbourne on 20 August 1860 and arriving at Menindee on 23 September 1860, where Burke established a depot under the charge of the medical officer Dr Beckler. The story of the survival of trooper Lyons and McPherson belongs to this phase and is an important story that provides a contrast to the fate of Burke, Wills and Gray, for it shows how Aboriginal people were able to prevent Lyons and McPherson from perishing. The second phase is the journey from Menindee on 19 October 1860 to Cooper Creek on 11 November 1860, where Burke left Brahe in charge of a second depot comprised of McDonough, Patten and Mahomet. The third phase concerns the journey of Burke, Wills, Gray and King to the Gulf of Carpentaria on 16 December 1860, the return of all but Gray to Cooper Creek on 21 April 1861 and the subsequent deaths of Burke and Wills in June 1861. King survived at Cooper Creek by living with local Aboriginal people until his discovery by Howitt's party on 15 September 1861.

The final phase of interaction concerns Aboriginal interaction with the various relief expeditions organised to search for Burke and Wills. These were the relieving expeditions led by A.W. Howitt, the first of which left Melbourne in June 1861. Also, the Victorian government despatched HMCS *Victoria* under the command of W.H. Norman to the Gulf of Carpentaria to assist in the search on 4 August 1861, a South Australian party led by John McKinlay left Adelaide on 16 August 1861, a party led by Frederick

Walker left Nagoa River on 15 September 1861, and finally a Queensland relief party, which included two Aboriginal members and was led by William Landsborough, journeyed southward from the Gulf of Carpentaria on 16 November 1861.

David Dodd, in Chapter 5, explores the Aboriginal contribution to the Burke and Wills Expedition through the writings and artwork of the four Germans – Becker, Beckler, Brahe and Neumayer – who were participants in the expedition. Showing how the scientists Beckler, Becker and Neumayer were influenced by Humboldtian practice, Dodd reveals how unique and valuable their insights and observations were, whether expressed in artwork or in formal written reports and journal entries. Dodd has examined the 35 pencil sketches Beckler intended to include in his proposed account of the expedition, which was published in English in 1993 (Beckler 1993) and we publish three of them in this volume – the first time they have been published (see Ch. 5, Figures 5.2, 5.3 and 5.6). We also publish, for the first time in English, Beckler's (1868) German journal article on Aboriginal corroborees (see Appendix 5.2). Dodd considers in some detail the argument that the Burke and Wills Expedition failed to utilise Aboriginal guides and shows that this discussion requires careful analysis, especially of the role played by the Aboriginal guides, Dick and Peter, in guiding Beckler's party and saving trooper Lyons and McPherson.

Luise Hercus, in Chapter 6, discusses the linguistic contribution of the expedition. Initially, she overviews the Aboriginal languages in the Cooper Creek region and then provides an analysis of the Aboriginal place names and personal names in the expedition literature. Where possible, she locates place names within the mythological ancestral stories that explain the creation and naming of country. This is an important chapter, that also corrects some misunderstandings that have crept into some



interpretations of the linguistic records generated by the expedition (Tipping 1979, p. 58; Jeffries in Beckler 1993, p. 129).

Harry Allen's chapter (Ch. 7) presents a history of the Aboriginal peoples of the Corner Country that includes Cooper Creek. He shows how the Aboriginal people living in the areas traversed by the expedition were 'at home' where they were surrounded by kin and where they possessed the intellectual tools that could explain the presence of exotic humans and animals. They were in country and it was familiar to them – it was the Europeans who were out of place, anxious, aggressive, bristling with arms and ready to use them. Allen reinforces the observation that neither the Aboriginal people nor the explorers arrived at the Cooper in a vacuum. The Aboriginal people had knowledge of Europeans through their contact with other tribes who had experience of explorers and pastoralists, and they had an established set of cultural protocols that dictated how they should deal with strange events. Similarly, the explorers had some 70 years of colonial exploration and experience in dealing with Aboriginal peoples. Allen observes that 'what is remarkable is how little of this experience the explorers appear to have drawn on, with disastrous results'. He also presents a history of missions in the Lake Eyre Basin from 1866 to 1915 that were initiated partly as a response to the humane care shown by the Yandruwandha to John King. Allen provides an overview of the emergence of scientific interest in the Aboriginal peoples of the Lake Eyre Basin and the contribution of Alfred William Howitt, who led relief expeditions to the region, to that scientific interest.

## Aboriginal oral histories

Fred Cahir in Chapter 8 and Darrell Lewis in Chapter 9 are both concerned with aspects of Aboriginal oral history. Cahir examines Aboriginal narratives that attest to encounters with European explorers, such as Burke and Wills. In the first part of his

analysis he shows how the documentary record reveals how Aboriginal people perceived non-Aboriginal people, then he examines Aboriginal perspectives into the Burke and Wills Expedition and the relief expeditions. His chapter shows that there were many recorded Aboriginal memories of the expedition, many of which challenge the usual version of the last days of Gray, Burke and Wills. Cahir has recovered a name given to Gray – *warugati wiltfella* ('emu-whiteman'). He has found sufficient evidence to reveal the bind that the Yandruwandha found themselves in – that of aiding and assisting outsiders in accord with cultural obligations, against the need to repel these future eaters who often ignored their advice and succour and did not abide by *kupara* (the reciprocity of exchange).

Darrell Lewis (Ch. 9) examines one particular oral account – that from an Aboriginal woman on the Cooper, recorded by a visiting squatter in 1874, that recounted how Burke had died at the hand of another white man. He examines the evidence for this, looking at various questions such as whether the squatter made up the story, whether the woman's memory could be wrong, whether the woman made up the story, or whether it was confused with some other event. Lewis concludes that there are major objections to the story – especially the fact that Howitt was not told about it, despite his time spent with the Yandruwandha – however, until he can explain how or why this story ever occurred to the woman and why she held to it, despite persistent questioning from the squatter, he is prepared to keep an open mind about the possibility that Burke died from a gunshot.

## Representations of the expedition

The expedition has been the subject of many poems and fictional accounts. For example, Adam Lindsay Gordon's (1867) 'Gone', in *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*, was written to mourn the death of Burke (Gordon 1913), Henry Kendall's (1861) 'The Fate of the

Explorers' was concerned with Burke and Wills, 'At Euroma' (Kendall 1995) dealt with the death of Charles Gray. Joseph Furphy's (aka Tom Collins) (1903) fictional work *Such is Life* discussed the death of Burke and Wills and was critical of their bush skills: 'there ain't a drover, nor yet a bullock driver, nor yet a stock-keeper, from 'ere to 'ell that could n't 'a' bossed that expegrition straight through to the Gulf, an' back agen, an' never turned a hair – with sich a season as Burke had. Don't sicken a man with yer Burke. He burked that expegrition, right enough'. Since then there has been Bill Reed's 1968 play, 'Burke's Company'. In 1985 two movies were released: *Burke & Wills*, directed by Graeme Clifford, starring Australian actor Jack Thompson as Burke and English actor Nigel Havers as Wills, and a spoof entitled *Wills & Burke*, directed by Bob Weis, in which Australian comic actors Garry McDonald and Kim Gyngell played Burke and Wills. Peter Oliver (1985) published his novel *Burke & Wills* to coincide with the movie release of the same name. Bonyhady (1991) has made an extensive study of the representation of the expedition in Australian high art and popular culture.

Deirdre Slattery, in Chapter 10, examines some of the mythic narratives about Australian culture that concentrate on the Burke and Wills Expedition – especially its heroic and tragic meanings – and overshadow other interpretations such as relationships with the land and its Aboriginal peoples. She explains how these myths value conquest and discovery but disdain slow and careful observation and adaptation to place and to another culture. The alternative versions of heroism and achievement in Burke and Wills narratives express an admiration for a certain openness to the external world – a state of mind in which curiosity is a source of intrinsic interest – something she finds encapsulated in the attitudes of Becker, Beckler and Howitt. In this context, Indigenous skills, knowledge, empathy, perception and environmental

response offer new ideas about how we explore and extend Australian identity.

Peta Jeffries, in Chapter 11, explores one of Ludwig Becker's paintings in which he interpreted a water reservoir at Mutwanji in 1861. She argues that the subjective nature of the work offers an understanding of Aboriginal connection to country. Becker's artwork is unique in that he is the only artist in the expedition who was inspired by German Romanticism and the Romantic Sublime. In *Water reservoir at Mutwanji*, Jeffries considers Becker has created a work that reveals the challenge that confronts many landscape artists – the desire to find and express the interconnection between people and place, self and other – that is, to understand country. She contends that, in this picture, Becker reveals the beginning of an alternative perspective to the naturalist way of perceiving landscape, and argues that it is possible that Aboriginal ways of relating to country influenced this transition away from naturalism. What is revealed in *Water reservoir* is a new aesthetic understanding of beauty and a new way of relating to the land.

Paul Lambeth's chapter (Ch. 12), is a personal investigation of the truism that we are living in an Aboriginal land, using the Burke and Wills expedition as a point of departure. He contributes to the development in our cultural understanding by offering his own representation of the events of the expedition. Standing at the Dig Tree, he reflected on what it means to be non-Indigenous in an Indigenous land, and saw an opportunity for a contemporary reading of the Burke and Wills tragedy. His intention was to transform a personal history of artistic practice into a cohesive body of work with both written and visual outcomes which are reproduced in this chapter.

## The relief expeditions

The next four chapters are concerned with various relief expeditions. Leigh Boucher (Ch. 13) is concerned with Howitt; Frank Leahy (Ch. 14) with Edwin Welch, who was

a member of Howitt's relief expedition and the first of that party to 'find' John King; Fred Cahir (Ch. 15) with John McKinlay; and Peta Jeffries (Ch. 16) with William Landsborough.

Leigh Boucher (Ch. 13) begins his chapter by tracing how Howitt represented his engagements with Aboriginal people in his diaries published in 1861, which included a deep acknowledgement of his party's obligations to Aboriginal people. He then moves on to consider how Howitt gradually removed that acknowledgement from his public recounting of the expedition, in the years from 1862 to his death. Boucher traces the disappearance of Aboriginal people from the public memorialisation of Howitt's involvement with Burke and Wills through visual art, another important site of cultural memory. He argues that, 'Unlike the failures of judgment, leadership and arrogance that seemed to plague the Burke and Wills expedition, Howitt provided a nourishing imaginative counterpoint of competence and territorial comfort. Here, finally, was an explorer who seemed able to take possession of Australia. Not only did he provide a chance to perform a melancholic attachment to Burke and Wills, he also provided a way for settler culture to take possession of a space that usually defeated so many others.' Furthermore, it 'seems important, then, to remember that Aboriginal people were crucial participants in this history of exploration, and Howitt's individual skills as a bushman do not come anywhere near to explaining his success on the other side of the frontier'.

Frank Leahy, in Chapter 14, researches Edwin Welch, the surveyor to Howitt's Victorian Contingent Exploration party, the first relief expedition led by Howitt. Welch is generally remembered for his 'discovery' of John King among the Yandruwandha at Cooper Creek, but Leahy makes a strong case that he should be remembered for more than this – for example, his observations of Aboriginal peoples and his collections of Aboriginal cultural materials and his

lifelong reflections on his involvement in the Burke and Wills story. Given the circumstances of his finding King, it is not surprising that Welch befriended King and his comments on the rumours that circulated in colonial newspapers in the 1870s that Burke had contributed to the death of Gray are particularly revealing. Leahy considers the evidence for these claims and concludes that 'King's secret' is likely to be about his experiences while living with the Yandruwandha and the possibility of a daughter being born to King after he left Cooper Creek. The concluding section on John King's daughter brings us full circle to the book's introduction where Aaron Paterson, a Yandruwandha man, attests that Alice King was the result of a sexual liaison between King and a Yandruwandha woman of Aaron Paterson's great-great-great-grandfather's family group.

Fred Cahir, in Chapter 15, examines the role of Aboriginal messengers in conveying news and their place in Australian exploration history, in particular their importance in the 1861 South Australian relief expedition led by John McKinlay. He includes an analysis of the news relayed by Aboriginal messengers about the progress of the McKinlay expedition, as published in colonial newspapers.

In Chapter 16 Peta Jeffries examines the relief expedition led by William Landsborough, who set out from the Gulf of Carpentaria southwards towards Victoria. She focuses on the role of Aboriginal guides, their relationship with country and with the Indigenous peoples they met, their relationship with Landsborough and in particular how these aspects influenced a series of encounters along the Barcoo in March, April and May 1862.

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# The members of the Victorian Exploring Expedition and their prior experience of Aboriginal peoples

*Ian D. Clark*

## Introduction

The consensus of many 19th-century commentators, such as Tenison-Woods (1865), Grimm (1888), Rusden (1897) and Turner (1904), on the Victorian Exploring Expedition was that, almost to a man, its various members were unsuited to the task that lay before them. Bonyhady's (1991, p. 60) assessment resonated with the views of these early commentators, in that of those who set out from Melbourne 'none of them had worked on the frontier, let alone ventured beyond the settled districts on previous expeditions. Only one or two were experienced bushmen. None had been born in Australia.' The purpose of this chapter is to test this view through assessing, where possible, biographical documents and other sources on the bush skills possessed by each member of the expedition and quantification

of their experience and interaction with Aboriginal people. It will concentrate on those men who at one time or another were paid members of the expedition.<sup>1</sup>

When the expedition left Melbourne on 20 August 1860 it comprised 22 men, however, by the time of its final reorganisation at Menindee in October 1860, some 30 men had been employed. Burke reorganised the expedition membership on numerous occasions, hiring new men when members had resigned or had been fired. For example, Creber and Fletcher were dismissed by Burke the day before the expedition departed and Cowen on the day of departure; they were replaced by McIlwhaine, Lane and Brooks. Samla, one of the four Sepoy cameleers, left three days out of Melbourne. Polongoux was recruited at the Mia Mia Hotel on 26 August and dismissed at Swan Hill on 6 September. Brooks, Lane and Esau Khan were dismissed

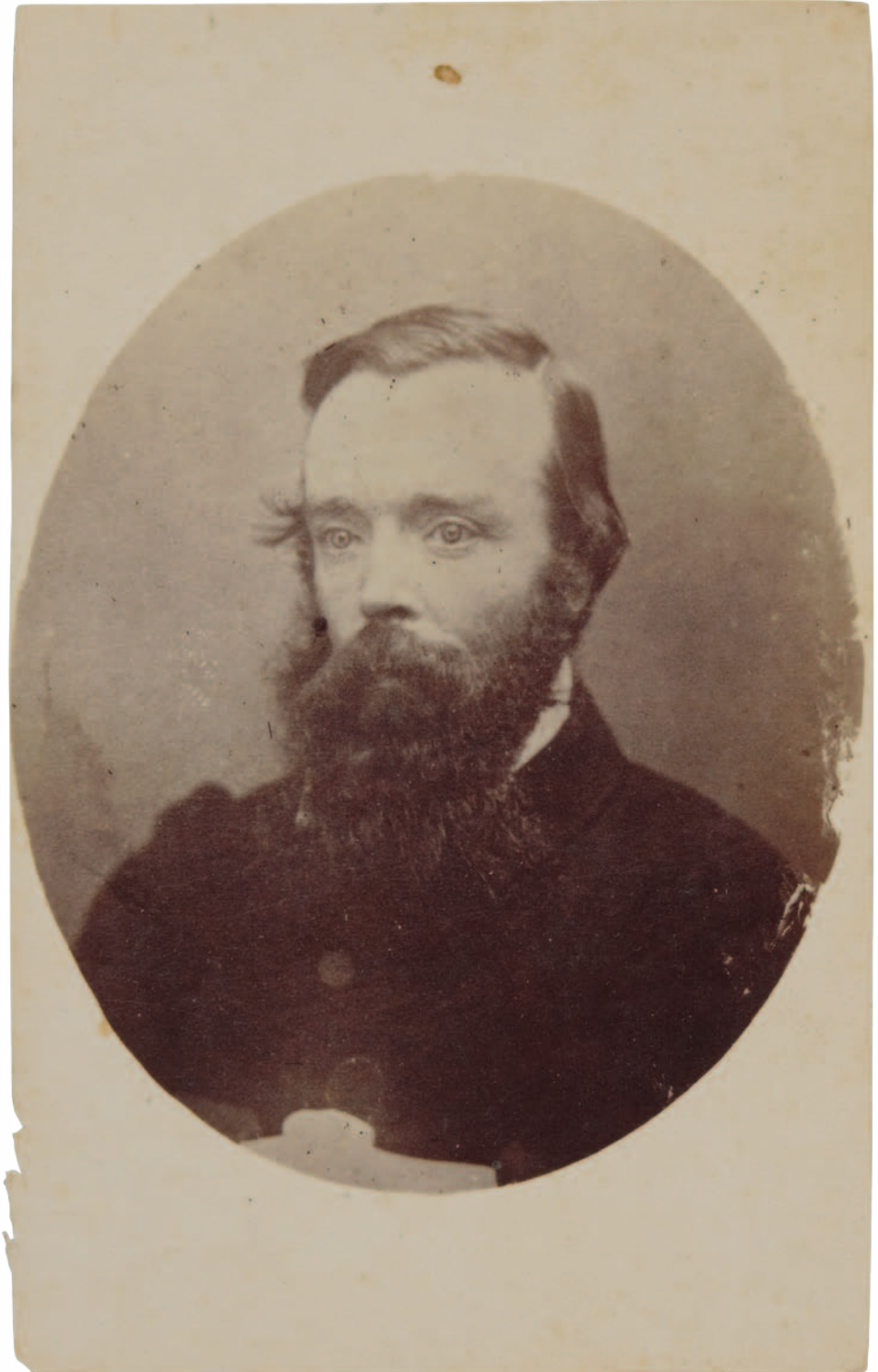
at Swan Hill, as well. In their place, Bowman, Hodgkinson, Gray and Macpherson were recruited. Bowman, McIlwhaine, Langan and Ferguson were dismissed at Balranald on 18 September 1860. Drakeford was dismissed and Landells and Beckler resigned at Menindee in October 1860, although Beckler agreed to remain until a replacement could be secured. Wright was recruited by Burke at Menindee. At Menindee Burke decided to divide the expedition, which now numbered 17 men, into two parties: one group comprising Beckler, Becker, Hodgkinson, MacPherson and Belooch was left at Menindee under the charge of William Wright with orders to bring supplies to the depot at Cooper Creek (Stone, Purcell and Smith were recruited at Menindee by Wright); the second group, led by Burke, comprised Wills, King, Gray, Brahe, Patten, McDonough and Mahomet and went on to Cooper Creek. Once at the Cooper, Burke divided that group, leaving Brahe in charge of Patten, McDonough and Mahomet, while Burke, Wills, Gray and King set off for the Gulf of Carpentaria.

It is possible to group the various members of the expedition into four clusters based around their primary experience: those who worked on pastoral stations, those associated with goldfields, those with experience of working with camels and a fourth group whose bush experience is unknown. It is not possible to learn of each member's association with Aboriginal peoples; however, on the basis of known Aboriginal settlement patterns in the 1850s that saw Aboriginal people gravitate around the pastoral runs and goldfields that formed on their traditional lands, we may assume that members with experience of pastoral stations and goldfields would have had some opportunity to interact with Aboriginal people. The office-bearers Burke, Landells, Wills, Beckler and Becker are discussed separately.

**Robert O'Hara Burke**, the leader of the expedition, 'had no experience as a surveyor

or bushman, was ignorant of navigation' and had never ventured beyond the settled districts (Bonyhady 1991, p. 30) (see Figure 2.1). He had shown little interest in exploration prior to his appointment. Born in Ireland at St Clerans, County Galway, in 1820 to an old Galway family, he joined the Austrian army in 1841 and was posted to northern Italy with the 7th Reuss Regiment of the Hungarian Hussars, where he advanced to the rank of lieutenant. He resigned from the army in 1848 and returned to Ireland where he joined the Irish constabulary. He arrived in Melbourne in March 1853, joined the Victorian police force and served at Jika Jika, Carlsruhe and Beechworth. After a brief leave of absence he was appointed Superintendent of Police at Castlemaine in December 1856.

We cannot be certain of Burke's interaction with Aboriginal people, but Allen (2011, p. 247) considered it possible that he 'may have had some limited experience of Aborigines living in the [Castlemaine] area'. Castlemaine fell within Djadjawurrung country, however, by 1863 only about 30 adults and seven children were known to be living across traditional Djadjawurrung lands and the Galgalgundidj clan belonging to the Castlemaine district had been reduced to one survivor (Clark 1990, p. 150). George Harrison, the police magistrate at Castlemaine, was one of the respondents to the 1858 Victorian government's Select Committee inquiry into the condition of Victorian Aborigines. He reported that there existed no regular tribe in the Castlemaine district, although a few natives 'hang about the diggings and are employed by dairymen and slaughtermen, and occasionally a straggler comes in from beyond the Loddon'. He confirmed that eight cases of drunkenness against the Aborigines had been heard at the Castlemaine bench in the previous three years (Victoria 1858–59). This confirms that the opportunity for Burke to interact with local Aboriginal people during his years at Castlemaine was somewhat limited and



*Figure 2.1:* Robert O'Hara Burke. Davies & Co., c. 1855–60. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H88.50/1.

probably confined to court appearances and policing. This probably goes a long way in helping to understand his interactions with Aboriginal people during the expedition; when these are examined, it is clear that Burke did not trust Aboriginal people and nor did he have any understanding of or respect for Aboriginal customs such as the usual protocols that were followed when meeting strangers for the first time. Allen's (2011, p. 256) analysis was that Burke's policy in relation to Aboriginal people was principally one of avoidance, as evidenced by the instructions he gave when he left Brahe in charge of the depot party at Cooper Creek: Brahe was to construct a substantial stockade and attempt to have as little to do with the Aboriginal people as possible. 'Burke maintained his policy of having as little to do with the Aborigines even after the explorers became reliant on Aboriginal gifts and they realised that their only chance of survival was to locate the Aborigines and live with them' (Allen 2011, p. 256). Burke died at Cooper Creek on or about 30 June 1861.

**George James Landells** was born in Barbados and arrived in Australia in 1856 (Phoenix 2011a, p. 12) (see Figure 2.2). He

was appointed second-in-command and was in charge of the camels. Moorehead (1963, p. 34) asserted that 'Landells is something of an enigma in the story of the expedition. Apart from the fact that he was an Englishman who was supposed to be an expert on camels, that his family had been settled in Australia since the forties, that he had a wife ... we know very little about him'. Landells resigned at Menindee on 14 October 1860. With Landells' resignation, Wills became second-in-command.

**William John Wills** was appointed surveyor, astronomical observer and third-in-command. Born in Totnes, Devon in 1834, Wills had been in Australia since January 1853 and had spent some time working as a shepherd on the Edward River at Deniliquin on a station owned by the Royal Bank Company (see Figure 2.3). Wills left Deniliquin and eventually joined his father's newly formed medical practice in Ballarat in late 1853. Van der Kiste (2011, p. 25) suggested that he spent the next couple of years working simultaneously as a digger on the Ballarat goldfields and as assistant surgeon in his father's practice, looking after patients in his father's absence and running



Figure 2.2: George Landells. 1860. Pencil. William Strutt. Burke and Wills Sketchbook, Victorian Parliamentary Library.



Figure 2.3: William John Wills. Photographed T.A. Hill, Engraved H.S. Sadd. Not dated but 1860. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H5412.



an assaying office in Ballarat in which he analysed specimens of gold and quartz. In January 1855 he worked for a short time on William Skene's Kanawalla Station, Hensley Park, on the Wannon River near Hamilton before returning to Ballarat and devoting himself to surveying and working in the Ballarat Survey Office. In the summer of 1853 he studied field-surveying at Glendaruel, near Tourello, under the supervision of assistant surveyor Frederick J. Byerley. In February 1857 he was working at Bullarook Creek camp and in March was surveying at Kingower near Inglewood; from April to June 1858 he was surveying at St Arnaud. In July he returned to Ballarat where he took occasional surveying contracts for Clement Hodgkinson, the deputy surveyor-general. In November he obtained a temporary appointment at the magnetic observatory in Melbourne, then a permanent appointment with Professor Neumayer, the government meteorologist, at the Melbourne Observatory.

All the rural localities that Wills was associated with fell within the countries of dialects of the Kulin continuum of languages, for example Deniliquin was Madimadi; Bullarook Creek, St Arnaud, Glendaruel and Inglewood (Djadjawurrung), Kanawalla (Djabwurrung) and Ballarat (Wathawurrung). In these locations, Wills would have had some opportunity to interact with Aboriginal people and learn something of their ways. For example, in 1858, C.W. Sherard, the Resident Warden in Ballarat, reported to the 1858 Victorian Legislative Council's Select Committee inquiry into the Aborigines that there were approximately 40 Aborigines living in the Ballarat district. In Wills' correspondence with his family, while based at Deniliquin, his father noted that he spoke of the 'blacks in that district; of their habits and ideas; but expresses a low opinion of their intellectual powers, and thinks little can be done with them' (Wills 1863, pp. 23–24).

The following extract from Wills' Field Book No. 1, dated 16 December 1860,

provides insights into his views of Aboriginal people:

*A large tribe of blacks came pestering us to go to their camp and have a dance, which we declined. They were very troublesome, and nothing but the threat to shoot them will keep them away. They are, however, easily frightened; and, although fine-looking men, decidedly not of a warlike disposition. They show the greatest inclination to take whatever they can, but will run no unnecessary risk in so doing. They seldom carry any weapons, except a shield and a large kind of boomerang, which I believe they use for killing rats, &c. Sometimes, but very seldom, they have a large spear; reed spears seem to be quite unknown to them. They are undoubtedly a finer and better-looking race of men than the blacks on the Murray and Darling, and more peaceful; but in other respects I believe they will not compare favourably with them, for from the little we have seen of them, they appear to be mean-spirited and contemptible in every aspect (Wills 1863, pp. 179–180).*

Four days later Wills noted a large camp of 40 to 50 blacks near where they camped for the night. The Aborigines gave the explorers presents of fish, and in return were given beads and matches. Wills noted, 'It is a remarkable fact, that these were the first blacks who have offered us any fish since we reached Cooper's Creek' (Wills 1863, p. 184). The following morning the party attempted to induce one or two of the blacks to accompany them but were unsuccessful in their efforts.

On 19 January 1861, Wills surprised an Aboriginal family:

*... a man who, with a young fellow apparently his son, was upon a tree, cutting out something; and a lubra with a piccaninny. The two former did not see me until I was nearly close to them, and then they were dreadfully frightened; jumping down from the trees, they*

*started off, shouting what sounded to us very like 'Joe, Joe'. Thus disturbed, the lubra, who was some distance from them, just then caught sight of the camels and the remainder of the party as they came over the hill into the creek, and this tended to hasten their flight over the stones and porcupine grass (Wills 1863, pp. 206–207).*

On 6 May 1861, Wills wrote in his diary, 'I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months' (Wills 1863, p. 282). On 26 June 1861, Wills noted that Burke and King had gone up Cooper Creek 'to look for the blacks – it is the only chance we have of being saved from starvation' (Wills 1863, p. 302). Wills Snr considered his son's account of this period 'shows how well my son had established himself in the good graces of the natives. Had it been his fortune to have survived, we should probably have had an interesting account of these simple aborigines and their doings' (Wills 1863, p. 294). Wills died on or about 30 June 1861 at Cooper Creek. There is some irony in the fact that at the outset of the expedition Wills had little regard for the Aboriginal ways of life and showed little respect for them, yet at the end when he was dying on the Cooper he recognised, somewhat belatedly, that the only way he was going to live was by adopting Aboriginal ways.

**Dr Hermann Beckler** was the expedition's medical officer and botanist (see Figure 2.4). He was born in Hochstadt, Bavarian Swabia, in 1828. Like Becker, he was influenced by the work of Alexander von Humboldt. He arrived in Australia in February 1856 and spent some time in the Ipswich, Tenterfield and Warwick districts working as a doctor and running a pharmacy for a short time in Warwick, all the while attempting to collect botanical specimens and make observations. In February 1859 he joined a droving party from south-west Queensland along the tributaries of the Darling River through New South Wales to Deniliquin. He left the party at Deniliquin

and in July 1859 arrived in Melbourne, where pursued his passion for botany with Mueller at the Royal Botanic Gardens. He spent time in the field gathering botanical specimens in New England from September 1859 until June 1860 and, according to Bonyhady (1991, p. 51), gained 'considerable experience as a bushman'. Wills Snr, however, considered Beckler was 'nothing of a bushman, although he had had so much travelling' (Wills 1863, pp. 93, 114). Jeffries (in Beckler 1993, pp. xvi–xvii) noted Beckler's 'opportunities to undertake serious botanical collecting were few and he never travelled into uncharted territory. But throughout his stay in Australia from 1856 to 1862 he was an enthusiastic and careful observer'. In his application to join the expedition, Beckler noted that he was 'not wholly unprepared to share the trials of the contemplated enterprise, having made myself acquainted with the requirements for such a purpose by studying the published accounts of Australian explorations, and by having performed an overland journey from Queen's Land to this colony, accompanying a friend who brought



Figure 2.4: Hermann Beckler. Courtesy of the Archives, Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne.

a large flock of sheep from the north to Port Phillip' (Beckler 1993, p. 195). Referring to a recently completed collecting expedition, he explained that he had 'travelled all over the Hastings, the MacLeay parts of New England and parts of the Clarence- and Richmond – River districts, including the eastern coast ranges and the elevated country on the upper Hastings, the MacLeay and the mountains known as the Guy Fawk's ranges in New England' (Beckler 1993, pp. 195–196). Beckler resigned at Menindee in October 1860 but agreed to remain until a suitable replacement could be secured. He spent the next three months collecting botanical specimens and in January 1861 started north with Wright's supply party.

Jeffries (in Beckler 1993, p. xxiii) noted Beckler's interest in Aboriginal matters, 'an interest stimulated when he first attended a corroboree in March 1858 at Warwick. Whenever the opportunity arose, he noted down fragments of Aboriginal music with great care'. Once he had returned to Germany, Beckler published a paper on this corroboree (Beckler 1867) and a second in which he discussed the expedition (Beckler 1872).<sup>2</sup> Jeffries considered that for Beckler the discovery of Aboriginal rock paintings at Scropes Range was a significant moment. Beckler 'acknowledged the assistance provided by [Aboriginal] guide Peter, who directed him to Torowoto Swamp where they found trooper Lyons and McPherson. Even when his life was threatened, he recognized the Aborigines' right to their own land and he admired the skilful diplomacy of Shirt, leader of the Aboriginal attack' at Bulloo on 27 April 1861 (Jeffries in Beckler 1993, p. xxxv). Beckler's discussion of the rock painting demonstrates an interest in Aboriginal culture; for example, after describing in some detail the Aboriginal paintings he was unable to 'think how the natives could create these paintings in which their own hands, represented as hands of the most varied sizes down to those of small children, formed the stencil. Later I was informed by

a native that the artist held a solution of colour in his mouth and sprayed it over his or another's hand, which was held spread out over the rock. These people paint with their mouths, and their oral cavity also forms their palette. However, there were also a few finger paintings, mostly incomprehensible symbols and figures, and one of which seemed to represent a rider on horseback' (Beckler 1993, p. 52).

At Torowoto, Beckler described his group's meeting with 16 Aborigines. His description showed a clear interest in Aboriginal people, as well as his powers of observation:

*They seemed to be astonished to see us and our animals [and] were very friendly and talkative. They were nearly all daubed with clay and were ugly, wretched creatures. Most of them were bathed in sweat and even at some distance their odour was extremely unpleasant, like that of all natives. We gave them various things to eat and they immediately set up camp close to ours. They were noisy and in high spirits until late that night. Our artist, Mr Becker, was of the opinion that two women with pendulous breasts and of unkempt appearance, both incidentally very ugly, frequently presented themselves in the attitude of the Venus de Medici. In the opinion of others, they were merely standing there quite casually, holding one arm over their breasts to protect them from the flies, while the other was constantly swung so as to fend off these pests (Beckler 1993, p. 112).*

On 1 March 1861, at Torowoto, Beckler noted the following transaction with local Aborigines:

*Natives had been here and they had gesticulated and talked a great deal. A few of them were smeared with fat and had recently painted themselves, obviously with great care. Stone was alone in the camp, and one of the natives had gone up to our bags of dried meat and taken out a large piece before his very eyes. Stone understood little of what*

*they were saying, but from his many years of dealing with the natives on the Darling he could tell that it concerned the following complaint. Hodgkinson was a passionate hunter, but for all his desire to kill some of the numerous wild ducks here, the natives were just as desirous of such quarry. The natives lived almost exclusively on ducks at this time, which they caught in their own fashion. They accused Hodgkinson with his frequent shooting of driving the ducks away from the creek. They were quite correct in this. However, they finished their passionate demonstration by demanding that we leave Duroadoo and return to the Darling or to Bulla (Beckler 1993, p. 126).*

Beckler gave a detailed description of the way these Aboriginal people hunted ducks. He also described the way a young native boy made a fire to cook a raven Beckler had given him: 'The youngster lit himself a fire, something I had seen only very rarely. In a similar fashion to the natives on the Murray, he took a large piece of wood and a small, short, smooth stick with a sharp edge and in rapid strokes he cut a furrow into the larger piece of wood, pressing with both hands. After two to four minutes the furrow began to smoke and soon there were sparks. From the hardly visible glow the youngster set alight some dry grass with a virtuosity alien to us' (Beckler 1993, p. 128). Beckler noted that the 'natives of Duroadoo belonged to two different tribes, calling themselves Macquarra and Killparra' (Beckler 1993, p. 129). Rather than tribal or language names, these are in fact Paakantyi moiety names (see Howitt 1904, p. 99, Makwarra = eaglehawk and Kilpara = crow). Very few early observers of Aboriginal societies learnt of moiety divisions in Aboriginal societies and, even though Beckler didn't understand its significance, the fact that he learnt this fundamental division is testimony to his relationship with Aboriginal people. Further evidence is found in Beckler's observation that Belooch was at risk of being killed by

Aboriginal people, which shows that he had knowledge of the fundamental tensions in Aboriginal society between groups with no cultural or kinship connection:

*My greatest worry was for Beludsch, who was now alone with the camels in Duroadoo, for it is well known that Europeans have far less to fear from the natives than do native people. The natives' hatred falls specifically on those natives or half-blacks (half-breeds or half-castes) from other tribes who accompany Europeans. They would soon discover that Beludsch, who as almost as dark as a negro, was completely different from their own race. He was therefore in some what less danger, but I was agitated nonetheless. I could hardly wait for the moment when I would reach our camp in Duroadoo. Late in the night a single native had come past his campfire, but had only exchanged a friendly 'Nelgo' with him – 'Good night!' (Beckler 1993, p. 134).*

On the Bulloo, Aboriginal men offered their women to Wright's party; rather than seeing this 'wife-lending' as an attempt to use sexuality as a means of establishing and maintaining sociality (Allen 2011, p. 255), Beckler considered the offers were motivated by hostile intent and designed to lure the Europeans from the safety of their camp (Beckler 1993, p. 154).

**Dr Ludwig Philipp Heinrich Becker** was appointed artist, naturalist and geologist (see Figure 2.5). In his application to join the expedition, Becker confirmed that he had been living in Australia for more than nine years and had a good knowledge of its climate, meteorology, geology and natural history, that he was accustomed to bush life and never lost his way as his instinct as well as calculation and a good sense for tracking always brought him to his destination, that he was a good horseman and that he could withstand hardship and privation and exist on the most simple fare. He was born in Offenbach-am-Main, Germany, in 1808.





*Figure 2.5:* Ludwig Becker. F. Schoenfeld, c. 1850–1860. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H84.273/2.

OPPOSITE *Figure 2.6:* 'Woannadie (Jungfrau) [young woman] V.D. Land Fiel [Van Diemen's Land] vom baum Eingeborne 1852'. Ludwig Becker. Watercolour. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H24662/1.



Woannadie. (Tuffin).

V. D. Land.

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Soil van Laim.

1852.

Becker arrived in Tasmania in March 1851 and spent 18 months travelling throughout the island, sketching and painting miniatures to make a living (see Figure 2.6). He also sketched some miniatures of Aboriginal women at Oyster Bay. He was a guest at Government House in Hobart. He arrived in Melbourne in November 1852 and spent some time on the Bendigo goldfields from 1853 to 1854 before settling in Melbourne (Cusack 1998, p. 126). He met William Buckley, the famed 'wild white man' who lived with the Wathawurrung people from the Geelong district for over 30 years, and painted an oil portrait of him which is now in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne. Becker was one of the first artists to depict life on the Bendigo goldfields. He avoided inflammation of the eyes, a common affliction among gold diggers, by smearing 'oil on his face, appreciating that Aborigines had long since learned how to protect their whole bodies against both those persistent flies and the glare produced by the reflected heat of solar rays from the quartz and the white tents' (Tipping 1979, p. 13). Phoenix (2011b, p. 298) noted, 'Over the next few years Becker took meteorological observations for Neumayer as well as working as an illustrator for Mueller and Professor Frederick McCoy'.

Becker returned to Melbourne in 1854 and contributed to the Paris Exhibition of 1855, where he showed, among other things, a pencil drawing and two portraits of Aborigines and 'part of a necklace made of native seeds and worn by a chief of the Murray Tribe' (Tipping 1979, p. 13). In 1854 he made a journey to the Murray River, visiting Kulkyne Station held by his friend Dr Richard Youl in partnership with Robert Orr. There he met Tilki (sometimes known as Jemmy) a local Tati-tati man, and sketched his portrait, along with one of Billy, a Port Fairy native, who was a servant of Dr Youl (see Figure 2.7). These portraits were exhibited in the 1855 exhibition. While drawing Tilki, Becker observed that the thumb of his left hand was damaged

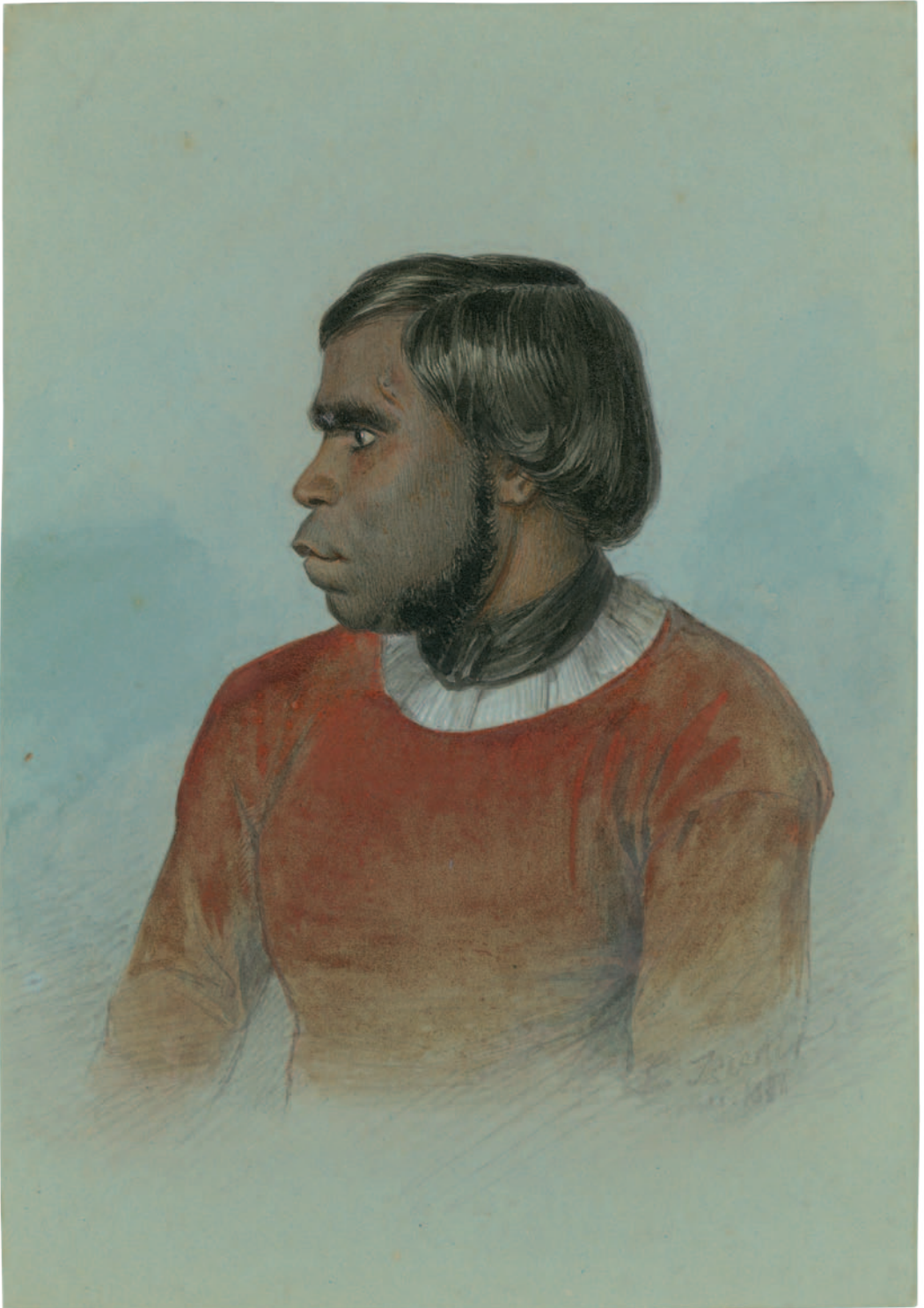
(Tipping 1991, p. 90). He asked the cause and Tilki informed him that 'I was a child and on my mother's back, when she, with other black women, searched for mussel-fish on the Murray near Mount Dispersion. There some men belonging to Mitchell's exploring expedition fired into us, and a musket ball carried off part of my thumb, which never grew afterwards so as well as the one I have left here on my right hand.' Tilki was referring to the May 1836 'clash' at a place Major Thomas Mitchell named Mount Dispersion, in which at least seven Aboriginal people were killed.

Becker is believed to have accompanied William Blandowski, a zoologist and the Museum of Victoria's first curator, and zoologist Gerard Krefft to the Lower Murray and Darling rivers in 1856 on a collecting trip (Tipping 1991, p. 96). At Kulkyne they witnessed the initiation ceremony of some young men.

In 1858 he contributed to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council's inquiry into the condition of Aborigines in Victoria. He reported that the Aborigines 'were not below the average intelligence of all the other uneducated masses of nations, whether belonging to the black, coloured or white races of man' (Tipping 1991, p. 93). In September 1858 he showed three Aboriginal skulls<sup>3</sup> and displayed his Aboriginal portraits at a meeting of the Philosophical Institute (later the Royal Society of Victoria), and noted that 'our own aborigines in Australia are of a much higher class than is usually and wrongly stated in works treating of the same subject' (Tipping 1979, p. 19). Tipping considered that 'Some of his best miniatures were of Aborigines, and he observed and sketched corroborees and wrote a detailed description of one for the Illustrated Melbourne Post. One of these sketches he gave to the tribe which had sent him a nest and a lyrebird egg, wrapped in a possum skin.'

Inspired by the views of Alexander von Humboldt, Tipping (1979, p. 21) considered





*Figure 2.7: 'Billy'. Ludwig Becker, 1854. Watercolour. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H6154.*

that Becker 'was a diligent observer of nature's treasures', who 'was astonished and delighted with everything he found in the New World'. Becker was the only member of the Royal Society who was a formal member of the expedition. He was among the party who remained at Menindee under Wright's leadership. He died at Bulloo on 29 April 1861 from 'what was probably a combination of scurvy and beri-beri' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 152).

Tipping's (1979, p. viii) observation of Becker's contribution to Australian Indigenous studies is that 'His observations and sketches of Aboriginals in particular, studied alongside the exciting archaeological discoveries of recent years in western New South Wales, will become more and more interesting to those working in anthropology and prehistory. He was one European who never underestimated the intelligence of the Aboriginal people.' During the expedition Becker sent to Melbourne 'the specimen of a corroboree song and tune which a Murray black had dictated in English, and he also jotted down the words and music of a love song'. Becker's sketches and portraits of Australian Aborigines 'were significant contributions to social history and anthropology' (Tipping 1979, p. 35).

Becker's first report contained an entry for 31 August 1860 relating to John Pearson Rowe's Terrick Terrick Plains Station near Durham Ox, in what was probably Barababaraba or Djadjawurrung country, that confirmed Ferguson's recollection of Aboriginal wonder at seeing the camels was not an exaggeration:

*In the afternoon 4 natives, among them a lubra, went their Stepps slowly towards the camp. With eyes and mouths wide open, speechless they stared at the Bunjibs, our camels, but refused to go nearer than a spears-throw. Although no strangers at Dr. Rowe's station, and notwithstanding our assurance that the camels were only harmless 'big sheep', they turned their back towards them and*

*squatted soon round a far off camp fire of their own, conversing in their native tongue; probably about the character of these illustrious strangers. If this first interview between natives & camels might be used as a criterion when coming in contact with the blacks in the course of our future journeys, then, surely, we might spare the gunpowder so long as the mesmeric power of our 'Bunjibs' remain with them (Tipping 1979, pp. 194–195).*

One interesting note in Becker's observation is that the Aboriginal people at Terrick Terrick Plains referred to the camels as bunyips. On 13 September 1860 Becker noted that the name of his camel was 'Bunjib' (Tipping 1979, p. 197), possibly after the famed mythical creature. Bunyips are the amphibious monsters that Aboriginal people believed inhabited waterways (Dixon *et al.* 1992, p. 109). Nineteenth-century Australian writers often wrote accounts of bunyips. Mereweather, during his ministry in the Riverina district in the 1850s, was keen to determine whether or not bunyips were 'real'. For example, on the Edward River, he met an 'intelligent black fellow' named Charley and attempted to elicit information from him:

*Some say it is an amphibious animal, which makes its home at the bottom of deep water-holes in the beds of rivers, and which draws down blacks, whilst bathing, to devour them; sometimes even pursuing them on the banks. Others assert that it is a beast, like the small hippopotamus, which lives among the reeds in the marshes by the side of rivers, and which causes great harm and loss to the indigenes, by sallying out at night and destroying the apparatus for catching fish: others declare that it is a gigantic, blood-thirsty otter, that eats children when it can catch them. When I asked Charley to portray me one on the dust with the point of my stick, he drew a great bird. I suspect that this creature does not exist now, even it is has once existed. The savages, however,*

*unanimously declare that some voracious animal exists in or about their rivers, and they have great dread of it. It may be a tradition that they have, just as we have of dragons (Mereweather 1859, pp. 93f).*

Several months later, at a station on the Murray River, Mereweather was told by an Aborigine that a carcass 'of that wonderful beast the bunyip' was 'lying rotting on a sand-hill nine miles off'. However, recent flooding prevented him from visiting the site (Mereweather 1859, p. 182). Several days later he heard 'evidence which goes so far as to prove that the bunyip is but a large and voracious otter' (Mereweather 1859, pp. 187–188). On the Darling River, he noted: 'The aborigines here, too, obstinately persist in their belief of the existence of the monstrous bunyip' (Mereweather 1859, p. 197).

## Experience of life on the goldfields

Those members of the expedition with experience of life on the goldfields included Charles Ferguson, William Brahe, Henry Creber and Owen Cowen. A recent doctoral study (Cahir 2006) showed that, far from being areas where Aboriginal people were absent, goldfields were important sites of Aboriginal agency, where Aboriginal people lived, discovered gold and often participated in mining. On this basis, we can assume that expedition members with some goldfields experience were likely to have had some interaction with Aboriginal people, albeit limited in some instances.

**Charles Ferguson**, the expedition's foreman, was originally from Ohio and before journeying to Australia in 1852 had spent two years on the Californian goldfields (see Figure 2.8). En route from Illinois to California, Ferguson's party was attacked by North American Indians who attempted to steal their horses; only 10 of the 23 Europeans escaped, including Ferguson with an arrow in his back. In the Sierra Nevada mountains they were attacked again by Indians before teaming up with a wagon train from Oregon. In May 1852, Ferguson

succumbed to the news of gold discoveries in Australia, and sailed for Australia. He worked on the goldfields at Bendigo and later at Ballarat, where he was part of the Eureka rebellion in November 1854. After the Eureka trial, Ferguson returned to mining and spent time in the Smythesdale, Happy Valley and Linton districts west of Ballarat. In these districts, Ferguson had several experiences with the local Wathawurrung Aboriginal people.



Figure 2.8: Charles D. Ferguson, 1853. Portrait reproduced from *The Experiences of a Forty-niner during Thirty-four Years' Residence in California and Australia*. Williams Publishing Co., Cleveland, 1888.

At Happy Valley Ferguson 'hired some blacks to strip some bark while we cut some poles, and by the third day after leaving Ballarat we had our store up and complete, with the help the boys had given us' (Ferguson 1888, p. 304). Relocating to Linton, he transacted with the Wardy yallock Aboriginal people. Ferguson's narrative showed that he adhered to the 19th-century notions that Aboriginal peoples would become extinct through contact with 'civilized' peoples; he did not always understand local customs. For example,

the horror displayed in the narrative by a wounded man's family at Ferguson's intention to cut a patient's hair so that he could treat a head wound, reveals that Ferguson was unaware of the Aboriginal concern that pieces of the human body, such as the hair, in the hands of traditional enemies could be used for harming practices. This explains why Aborigines very carefully picked up every piece of hair so that it did not fall into enemy hands:

*I neglected to mention that as soon as Walter got things arranged, he came down to Linton's. There were at that time a large number of Wadagalac blacks there, the tribe numbering some two hundred; now they are totally extinct – the ultimate fate of the savage when civilized man enters his domain. There was one black fellow of this tribe who told me he knew where there was plenty of gold, about sixty miles away, and offered to take me or Walter there. We made arrangements to go with him and take one other person also, but the night before they purposed to start, another tribe of blacks came down on them, a great fight ensued, and our black pioneer friend received a blow on the head that would have crushed a white man's skull like an egg-shell. It came near killing him. The blacks sent for me; I found him to all appearance dead, but on examination discovered that he still breathed. A dozen or more women were around him, all howling. One related to him seemed to take the lead in this strange style of mourning, and I began to feel sorry for her, as it seemed as though her heart would break and she would lose her reason. All at once she stopped, and asked me to give her a pipe of 'bakka'. 'Yes', said I, 'if you will stop that infernal howling.' Upon this they all proposed to cease on the same terms. I gave them the tobacco, and they all knocked off and lit their pipes, and that was the last of the howling. So I saw that grief, sentiment*

*or affection had nothing to do with it, only funeral style, inherited from their remotest ancestors. Their distress was all 'put on'.' The man had a terrible cut on the head, the gash being nearly three inches long and laying open the skull. I had often heard of the thickness of the skull of the blacks, but had never before seen one laid open, nor did I ever believe that it was half so thick as this man's. I had brought some court-plaster and some castile soap and a pair of scissors. It was necessary to cut away some locks of hair.*

*The hair of these natives is as thick as a mat, is never combed, and is as coarse as a horse's tail, and as soon as I commenced to cut it the woman set up a louder and still more disagreeable howl. I stopped them, but found they did not want me to cut his hair. I explained the necessity thereof to save his life, and then they quieted down and appeared satisfied, but watched me and picked up every hair that was dropped. I plastered him up and left him, and came that night to see my patient and found he had become conscious, but did not believe he would recover. One can judge of my surprise when, only four days after, he came down to my store and said he was ready to go on the prospecting trip. They started the following day and were gone about two weeks (Ferguson 1888, pp. 308–309).*

In September 1858 Ferguson turned his attention to horse-taming and showed his talents by going on tour in New South Wales and Victoria as a pupil of the celebrated John Solomon Rarey, the famous Ohio horse-tamer. In 1859 he turned to coaching, and followed the gold rush to Kiandra in New South Wales. Ferguson had a reputation as a fine coach-driver and expert horse-tamer. While there is little discussion in any of the literature of Ferguson's interactions with Aboriginal peoples, his years spent in rural Victoria and New South Wales, and especially his horse handling, would have given him many opportunities for interaction. In his



reminiscences, Ferguson mentioned the interest the Aboriginal people showed in the expedition's camels. As he was dismissed at Balranald, on 14 September 1860, these comments obviously relate to the journey between Melbourne and Balranald:

*Men, women and children along the line and from stations and ranches many miles distant, came in to see the camels, and in nearly every instance the black natives, to whom the camels were alike a curiosity and a dread, compared them to the emu, for the reason, I suppose, of their long neck, for in no other feature could I see the slightest comparison. They were very shy of them, and never could one of them be induced to mount the animal or even go very near one. They would only approach in crowds, and those behind, in their eagerness to see, would push those in front uncomfortably near, and when the camel would make that gurgling sound which it often does when displeased or cross, it was laughable to see the blacks tumble over each other to get out of his way or reach, for they invariably approached in squads of a dozen or more. The men had much sport with the blacks and camels, for the latter seemed to thoroughly detest the blacks, and would show viciousness whenever they approached, and seemed to know the blacks were afraid of them (Ferguson 1888, pp. 389–390).*

In 1863 Ferguson successfully sued the Exploration Committee for wrongful dismissal, and received £183 6s. 8d. in lieu of damages. Ferguson was one of the few on the expedition with experience of Indigenous peoples from two continents – North America and Australia.

**William Brahe** was employed as an assistant to the expedition (see Figure 2.9). He was a Westphalian from Paderborn, Germany, born in 1835. He arrived in Victoria in 1852 and worked as a digger on the Ovens diggings in the neighbourhood of Beechworth and as carrier at various stations

for two years. In his letter of application, he explained that he had also worked as a stockkeeper at Niel Black's Glenormiston Station, adjoining Terang, and at Richard Box's Barwidgee Station near Beechworth, during which time he became adept at driving wagons and learnt all he could about horses and cattle. He deemed himself 'thoroughly acquainted with the handling of horses and the management of cattle' and 'can do any work which can be required from a bushman'. Murgatroyd (2002, p. 70) claimed that Brahe was chosen largely because his brother was a friend of Professor Georg Neumayer. His brother, William Alexander Brahe, a solicitor, had arrived in Victoria in 1849 and later served in Victoria as Consul for Prussia (1868), the North German Confederation (1869) and the German Empire from 1870 (Cusack 1998, p. 152). Wills Snr (1863, p. 178) noted that 'Brahe could travel by compass and observation'. At the government inquiry into the expedition, when asked if he had had any experience of 'natives before' joining the expedition, Brahe replied 'I have seen some in the Port Fairy district'. In the early 1850s there were some 83 Aboriginal people living in the Port Fairy district (Clark 1990, p. 45). They had a very visible presence in Port Fairy, regularly



Figure 2.9: 'Brahe of Burke's Party'. William Strutt, 1861. Oil on canvas. 18.4 × 27.8 cm. In 'A Collection of Drawings in Water Colour, Ink and Pencil by William Strutt R.B.C., R.Z.S. Illuminating the Burke and Wills Exploring Expedition Crossing the Continent of Australia from Cooper's Creek to Carpentaria Aug. 1860 – June 1861'. Dixon Library, State Library of New South Wales.

shifting camp, staging corroborees and occasionally working for wages. When asked if he knew whether any of the other men at the Cooper Creek depot (Patten, McDonough and Mahomet) had any prior experience of the natives, Brahe replied 'No'.

With Ferguson's departure, Brahe was appointed foreman (Moorehead 1963, p. 55) and left in charge of the depot at Cooper Creek, along with Patten, McDonough and Mahomet. Burke had instructed Brahe to have minimal contact with the Aboriginal people; during the four months Brahe was at the depot he 'shouted at, physically hit or fired on Aborigines on four occasions. On the other hand, the Aborigines warned Brahe that a flood was coming down the Cooper' (Brahe n.d. [1 March 1861] in Allen 2011, p. 256).

**Henry Creber**, born in 1834 in Liverpool, was a sailor and sail-maker with some experience of surveying and had spent four years on the goldfields. He was employed as an assistant to the expedition, specifically to help assemble stores at Royal Park on the outskirts of Melbourne. Creber had been recommended for inclusion by Royal Society of Victoria secretary John Macadam in case an inland sea was discovered (Murgatroyd 2002, p. 70). Also, 'he was selected for his knowledge of tent making, and that peculiar faculty displayed by sailors in fixing everything gone loose in the shortest possible time and with the most indifferent materials – a faculty invaluable to an exploring expedition, where delays are dangerous and marine stores inaccessible' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 58). Burke dismissed Creber on 19 August, the day before the expedition's departure from Melbourne, 'for disrespectful language and demeanour towards Mr Landells'.

**Owen Cowen**,<sup>4</sup> who was employed as an assistant to the expedition, was a well-conducted Irish Catholic of perfectly sober habits who had acted as orderly to the Lieutenant-Governor, served in C.J. Tyers' coastal survey, travelled 300 miles inland from Moreton Bay and been on both sides of the Darling. In 1846 he served as a border

policeman in Gippsland and in 1850–51 as a corporal and then sergeant with the Native Police Corps in Victoria; after a stint on the Bendigo goldfields he rejoined the police force where he gained the rank of senior constable at Mansfield. Murgatroyd (2002, p. 70) suggested Cowen was selected by Burke because he was a fellow Victorian police officer. As a border policeman Corporal Cowen accompanied a detachment of the Native Police Corps in Gippsland in December 1847. On 19 December he had a hand-to-hand struggle with an Aboriginal assailant during which he was speared in the hand, knocked to the ground, lost and then regained his pistol, hit his assailant over the head with it and barely escaped with his life (Fels 1988, pp. 189–190). In March 1850 he was leading a detachment of the Corps when it surprised a group of Aborigines in the act of killing cattle on Donald McLeod's Narrung Station on the Murray, opposite the Murrumbidgee junction (Fels 1988, pp. 169–170). In May 1850 he was stationed at Swan Hill when trooper Edward was attacked by two Swan Hill Aborigines known as Captain Denholm and Peter, and subsequently died from injuries (Fels 1988, p. 165).<sup>5</sup> From December 1850 until August 1851, Cowen and a detachment of the Corps were based at the Pentridge Stockade where they were responsible for guard duty (Fels 1988, p. 206). Sergeant Cowen resigned from the Corps in November 1851. He had been a policeman for 12 years, had travelled throughout Victoria, tracked several criminals with success and was 'thoroughly acquainted with the bush'. Bonyhady (1991, p. 57) considered that all this made him a 'likely explorer'. However, Cowen was dismissed by Burke on the day of the expedition's departure 'for drunkenness' – he had participated too freely in the celebrations and was 'a little too hilarious through excess of beer'. Cowen's dismissal is regrettable as he was one of a handful of men originally selected who had extensive experience of working and interacting with Aboriginal people.



## Experience of pastoral life

Those with some experience of pastoral life included Robert Fletcher, Charles Gray, Alexander McPherson and John Drakeford. This is important, for the remnants of Aboriginal clans often congregated on stations that had formed on their traditional lands, where they worked as shepherds and drovers, so pastoral life should have afforded some opportunity to interact with Aboriginal peoples.

**Robert Fletcher**, an English-born gentleman who had studied medicine, was employed as an assistant to the expedition, specifically as personal attendant to Burke, and then as storekeeper and camel groom. He had spent several years in Victoria as a bushman, labourer and wood cutter. Murgatroyd (2002, p. 70) claimed he was selected because his father was a friend of several Exploration Committee members. Fletcher was dismissed by Burke on 19 August, the day before the expedition's departure from Melbourne, for incompetence. In Burke's second despatch, sent from Swan Hill on 8 September 1860, he claimed that Fletcher had resigned.

**John Drakeford** was an English-born, old southern African hand who had spent years in the Cape mounted police and had reportedly turned down the opportunity to explore with Livingstone. He was employed as an assistant to the expedition, as camel-handler and cook. He was in India when Landells was buying camels, and sailed to Australia with Landells, King and the cameleers. Bonyhady (1991, p. 58) asserted that Landells was responsible for Drakeford's appointment. Drakeford was discharged at Menindee on 14 October 1860. In 1863 he successfully sued the Exploration Committee for the balance of his wages (Phoenix 2011a, p. 15). Although Drakeford's experience of Australian seems limited, he probably had experience of interacting with Indigenous peoples in southern Africa.

**John Polongaux**, a Frenchman who had worked on the Bendigo diggings, was

recruited by Burke at the Mia Mia Hotel on 26 August to attend to the expedition's animals. In his second despatch, Burke reported that Polongaux 'proved himself to be a very useful man, he is a good bushman, cook and driver'. Nevertheless, Burke dismissed him at Swan Hill in mid September 1860.

**Charles Gray**, a Scottish-born former sailor, worked as an ostler at the Lower Murray Inn in Swan Hill, had worked for the Cobb & Co. service between Bendigo and Swan Hill and had been a digger on the Bendigo goldfields (see Figure 2.10). Gray joined the expedition at Swan Hill some time between 6 and 12 September 1860. In 1859 he had ridden as a jockey for John Maddern, a prominent subcontractor and bricklayer in Swan Hill (Feldtmann 1973, p. 70); this attests to his horse-handling skills. Swan Hill police superintendent Henry Foster recommended Gray to Burke as a highly suitable addition to his retinue (Feldtmann 1973, p. 106). According to Thomas Dick, the publican at the Lower Murray Inn and Gray's employer, Gray was 'A stout hearty man, and a better bushman was not to be found. There are gentlemen here who know what the Mallee Scrub is, behind Swan Hill, and I have sent him fifteen miles back into the scrub and he was the man to find the cattle; no man at Swan Hill was equal to him' (Victoria 1861–62, p. 63). Dick explained to the Commission of inquiry that he had been Gray's employer for 15 months, and in that time Gray had worked as a general servant, as a cook, as an ostler and as a puntman operating the punt across the Murray River. Gray was one of the four that went to the Gulf of Carpentaria – he was responsible for handling the group's supplies and preparing meals. He died on or about 17 April 1861 at Polygonum Swamp, South Australia, some 15 miles from Cooper Creek.

**Alexander 'Sandy' McPherson**, a Scottish-born (1835) saddler working in Epsom, near Bendigo, joined the expedition at Swan Hill on 6 September 1860. Very little is known about him. In November



Figure 2.10: Charles Gray. De Gruchy & Leigh *Charles Gray*, 1861. Lithograph. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H37475/33.

1860, trooper Myles Lyons arrived at the Menindee depot, from Swan Hill, with despatches from the Exploration Committee concerning the progress of John McDouall Stuart's abandoned expedition and new plans proposed by Georg Neumayer and Lieutenant Crawford Pasco, of Swan Hill, for a ship to meet the expedition at the Gulf of Carpentaria. Lyons insisted on delivering the despatches to Burke in person, so Wright

arranged for a small party to accompany him. As Burke was in need of a saddler, Wright sent McPherson, and as they both required an Aboriginal guide, Dick (aka Mountain) accompanied them. The three men became lost and failed to deliver to despatches to Burke. Dick guided the party to Torowoto, and returned to Menindee alone on 19 December. Wright sent Beckler to lead a party comprising Belooch and the Aborigine, Peter,

to rescue McPherson and Lyons. Before he left the pair at Torowoto, Dick had arranged for the local Aboriginal people to care for them in return for 'plenty tomahawks and shirts' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 147).

McPherson's exposure to Aboriginal people before joining the expedition must have been limited, as evidenced by the following example of his naïveté in his dealings with them. McPherson explained to Beckler how the Torowoto 'natives used certain seeds as food and thought that these could also be a valuable means of subsistence for us if only he could obtain the seeds and the grindstones used by the natives, as there were no stones in the whole region. I (McPherson) now gave various articles that I still had to a young native and beseeched her to go with me and show me the seeds. The natives seemed angry, though, when she went with me. She remained with me until I had a small tin dish full of seeds, after which she promptly disappeared' (Beckler 1993, pp. 74–75). Allen's (2011, p. 263) analysis was that 'the girl and her guardians must have thought that McPherson, in giving gifts and asking the girl to go with him, had quite another motive in mind'.

**William Oswald Hodgkinson**, born in 1835 in Warwick, England, first came to Australia in 1851 when working as a midshipman. He returned to Australia in 1853 and worked as a clerk to William Templeton, the goldfields commissioner at Maryborough. The following year he returned to England and worked in the War Office until 1859, when he returned to Australia and worked as a journalist in Melbourne for *The Age*. He joined the expedition at Swan Hill on 10 September 1860, along with Professor Georg Neumayer who had agreed to accompany the expedition to the Darling. He had known Burke when they were both working in Castlemaine. Hodgkinson was part of the expedition left at Menindee under Wright's leadership. Beckler described him as 'a talented young man, had been well brought up and had even enjoyed a

classical education, and yet he was the most evil animal of a person that I have ever encountered'. Beckler referred to Hodgkinson as 'an insolent, malicious lad ... who annoyed, insulted and attacked us without exception ... He alone was the scorpion, the gnawing worm we carried with us' (Beckler 1993, p. 93). Hodgkinson 'was a passionate hunter' (Beckler 1993, p. 126) and it seems that one of his primary roles was to supply the party with meat. Hodgkinson drew several watercolours of the expedition; one depicts the Aboriginal attack on the depot at Bulloo and a second the water hole at Korliatto. Hodgkinson subsequently became second-in-command of the John McKinlay-led South Australian Burke Relief Expedition.

**Robert Bowman**, who had accompanied A.C. Gregory on his North Australian and Leichhardt search expeditions, was recruited at Tragowel Station, on the Loddon River, on 4 September 1860. His original application to join the expedition had been unsuccessful, despite the fact that his credentials were impressive. Burke, in his second despatch, reported that Bowman was 'a man of great experience who was out with Gregory on two trips'. Bonyhady (1991, p. 56) considered he was ripe for appointment, was one of the strongest applicants and had already served with distinction with Gregory's exploration expedition. He 'had vast experience of the desert and the tropics but was familiar with the route between Moreton Bay, Cooper's Creek and Adelaide' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 88). 'We made a good acquisition on the morning that we left Holloways. One of the best of stockmen came to us, a man called Bowman, whom Gregory had had with him on both of his expeditions, and Mr Burke engaged him. However, he did not like it with us at all and he left us after only a few days' (Beckler 1993, p. 24). Bonyhady (1991, p. 95) noted that Bowman 'had quit near Bilbaka', most likely on account of Burke's leadership. McCann (2011, p. 295) recorded Bowman's resignation as near Paika (north of Balranald) on 18 September



1860. In contrast, 'In fact Robert Bowman stayed with the Expedition more than just a few days. He was the most experienced explorer employed on the Expedition, having previously travelled with Augustus Charles Gregory in the Gulf of Carpentaria, on Cooper Creek, and down Strzelecki Creek to Mount Hopeless. Unfortunately, although he had a comprehensive knowledge of the area the Expedition was heading to, Burke dismissed him on 18 September 1860 in Balranald, New South Wales' (Phoenix 2011a, p. 97).

William Wright, Charles Stone, William Purcell and John Smith were recruited at Menindee, where presumably they would have had extensive interaction with Aboriginal people. Smith was of Aboriginal descent.

**William Wright** was an overseer or superintendent of John Baker's Kinchega cattle station near Menindee and was recruited for his local knowledge. He had been overseer for three years (Beckler 1993, p. 190) and was seeking new employment after the recent sale of Kinchega. Burke appointed Wright third-in-command. He had travelled as far north as Bulloo River, then known as Wright's Creek, searching for

suitable grazing land (Parker 2009; Allen 2011, p. 247). Wright was personally known to Francis Cadell, a member of the Exploration Committee, who was able to recommend him to other members as an experienced bushman (Bonyhady 1991, p. 148). Edward Wecker, a storekeeper in Cadell's employ at Menindee, informed the Commission of Inquiry that Wright 'was well acquainted with the country between Torowoto and the Darling' (Victoria 1861-62, p. 25). Tolcher (1996, p. 29) considered he was a 'practised bushman'. Wright informed the Commission that he had visited the country 20 miles beyond Torowoto, towards Cooper Creek, on two occasions during the three years he had been at Menindee (see Figure 2.11). He considered he knew more of that country 'than any other man on the Darling at that time'. When asked if he knew the blacks, he replied, 'Yes: I told Mr Burke before I left him that I would procure guides to take him on to Cooper's Creek, which I did. I got the natives that were with me to get blacks to take him on as far as Bulloo; they left him there, and he crossed to Cooper's Creek without any guides. Mr. Burke had guides with him to Bulloo' (Victoria 1861-62, p. 44).

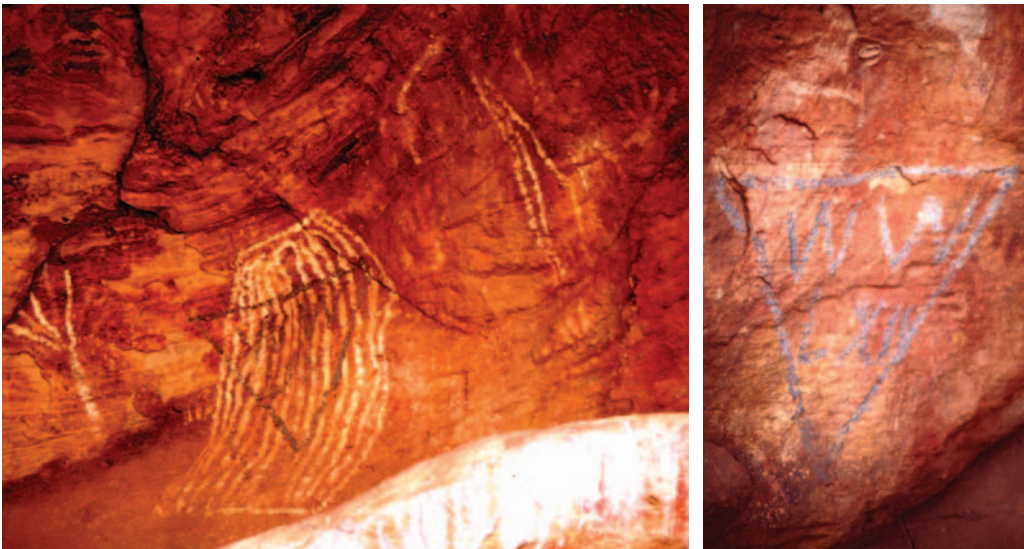


Figure 2.11: On his northern trips in 1859 and in 1862, William Wright painted marks in this cave of Aboriginal paintings. Photographs: Philip A. Clarke, Mootwingee, western New South Wales, 2004.

Wright was left in charge of the depot at Menindee in October 1860, along with Beckler, Becker, Hodgkinson and Belooch, and was expected to follow to Cooper Creek with the heavy stores. Wright was responsible for the appointments of Stone, Purcell and Smith. Wright would have gained some knowledge of the local Paakantyi people at Menindee and most likely of Paakantyi-speaking people to their north, including the Wandjiwalku, Bandjigali, Malyangapa and Wadikali, and their Karnic-speaking neighbours including the Wangkumara of the Bulloo River. Wills Snr considered Wright 'a more ignorant being than whom could not have been extracted from the bush. He was scarcely able to write his name' (Wills 1863, p. 94). However, this judgement seems overly harsh when Wright's diary is considered (see below). Beckler commented that Wright had long years of association with the natives and 'had a great knowledge' of them (Beckler 1993, p. 165). Some of this knowledge is reflected in the following entries from his diary:

*Wednesday, 13th February*

*Shortly after our arrival at Torowotto, a tribe of natives came towards us. There were about seventeen, perfectly unarmed. A tassel tied round the loins of the men, and a few emu feathers depending from the chin as ornaments, composed their stock of clothing. They appeared to be very healthy and in good condition. I gave them two tomahawks and some broken biscuit, endeavoring to make them comprehend that I wished two of them to accompany the party. I selected two, and gave them each a shirt. They were well acquainted with the various creeks, and named several places in advance, but our mutual ignorance of each other's language rendered it impossible to obtain any serviceable information. In the evening they brought their women to the camp, and freely offered them as presents in return for the few things we had given them. Most of the males*

*were circumcised, but the cicatrices in the arms and breasts peculiar to some tribes were not marked in the Torowotto natives.*

*Friday, 5th April, to Wednesday, 17th April. Bulloo*

*On the two occasions to which I have referred as advancing northerly I was compelled to turn back from the hostility of the natives, who, upon my camping, collected in large numbers, making fires all round me, and trying to entice Smith, who accompanied me, by means of their women. Bands often visited the camp, signifying the ground to be theirs, and ordering us to move away.*

It is interesting to note that during the confrontation with Mr Shirt's mob of Aborigines at Korliatto water hole at Bulloo on 22 April 1862, Wright was unable to communicate with the Aborigines in any Aboriginal dialects other than by using what Beckler (1993, p. 169) described as 'the bold expressions of Australian "bush-slang", wishing them thoroughly to the very depths of hell'.

**Charles Stone** was one of three Kinchega Station hands recruited at Menindee by William Wright. Hardy (1969, p. 119) noted that Stone and others had explored the Barrier Ranges north-west of Menindee in 1856, travelling from Weinteriga Station, north of Kinchega Station. Parker (2009, p. 249) considered that Stone was an 'experienced bushman'. Stone had 'many years of dealing with the natives on the Darling' and was able to use their language (Beckler 1993, pp. 126, 169) although, as Parker (2009, p. 250) observed, 'it is not clear that it was understood' by the Aboriginal people at Bulloo. During the confrontation at Bulloo on 22 April 1862, between Wright's party and local Aborigines led by Mr Shirt, 'Poor Stone, who was lying close to death, called to them in the language of the Darling natives and in the broken voice of a dying man that they should try our patience no longer for we did not want to hurt them.

We should not be staying here for ever. We would never allow ourselves to be driven off. Our dreadful earnestness and the voice of the dying man speaking in a language related to there [sic] own seemed to make them hesitate' (Beckler 1993, p. 169). Stone died at the Korliatto water hole on Bulloo River, Queensland, later that day from 'what was probably a combination of scurvy and beri-beri' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 152).

**William Purcell** was another Kinchegea Station hand recruited at Menindee by Wright and he served as the depot's cook. He died at Korliatto water hole on Bulloo River on 23 April 1861, probably from the same diseases that killed Stone (Bonyhady 1991, p. 152).

**John Smith** was the third man recruited at Menindee by Wright. Smith, 'a part-Aboriginal bushman', had recently arrived at Menindee and on 7 December 1860 was hired

to watch the camels (Bonyhady 1991, p. 144). In his evidence to the Commission of Inquiry, Smith reported that he was a stranger to Menindee and the country beyond and that he had come down to Menindee from the Murray. He had been among the blacks a good deal on the Murrumbidgee and about there. He confirmed that he was not afraid of the blacks and did not consider that they had any particular enmity towards him. Beckler described Smith as a native but half-caste, the son of a European and a native (Beckler 1993, pp. 95–99). Unfortunately, Smith's Aboriginal language affiliation is unknown. On the basis of his association with the Murray and Murrumbidgee, he may have been Madi Madi, Wadi Wadi or Wiradjuri. At Bulloo, Smith was unimpressed with Beckler's plan to make a meal of 48 freshly caught rats: 'It was our half-caste Australian who



Figure 2.12: 'Long-haired rat, *Rattus villosissimus*. Camp 48, Tongowoto Waterhole, New South Wales'. Ludwig Becker. 23 February 1861. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.



objected the most and who was unable to overcome his disgust. He was so dark that he was more of a credit to his Australian mother than to his European father, and one might reasonably have expected him to be willing to eat rat flesh prepared in the European manner' (Beckler 1993, p. 163) (see Figure 2.12). Smith remained at the Menindee depot under Wright's charge. Wright's journal (see above) shows that on at least one occasion local Aboriginal people attempted to interact with Smith by offering him sexual access to their women.

## Experience working with camels and cameleers

A third group of expedition members comprised those whose primary reason for inclusion was their experience working with camels: Dost Mahomet, Belooch Khan, Esau Khan and Samla. John King is included in this group because he was employed by Landells for his ability to speak the language of the cameleers.

**John King**, born at Moy in County Tyrone, Ireland, in 1841, was employed as an assistant to the expedition. He was an Irish soldier who saw duty in India and was an assistant teacher in the school attached to the 70th Regiment in Cawnpore, India (see Figure 2.13). Landells met him at Karachi, where he was convalescing from a fever. Given that King could speak the language of the camel handlers, Landells employed him as an assistant to bring the camels from Karachi to Melbourne. Bonyhady (1991, p. 58) asserted Landells was responsible for King's appointment to the expedition. When Landells resigned, King was given responsibility for the camels. Presumably, it was this responsibility that ensured that Burke included King in the party of four that went to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Indeed, he was the sole survivor of that group and lived with the Yandruwandha Aboriginal people at Cooper Creek for three months before he was discovered by Welch and Howitt in September 1861. King's narrative (Victoria

1861–62) makes it clear that when he found himself alone on the Cooper, he resolved to throw his lot in with the Yandruwandha, shifting camp with them and acting dumb when they attempted to leave him behind:

*They appeared to feel great compassion for me when they understood that I was alone on the creek, and gave me plenty to eat; after being four days with them I saw that they were becoming tired of me, and they made signs that they were going up the creek and that I had better go downwards, but I pretended not to understand them. The same day they shifted camp, and I followed them, and on reaching their camp I shot some crows, which pleased them so much that they made me a breakwind in the centre of their camp, and came and sat round me until such time as the crows were cooked, when they assisted me to eat them (Victoria 1861–62, p. 104).*

While King's crows endeared him to the Yandruwandha, it was one particular act of kindness that ensured he became an adopted member of that tribe:

*The same day one of the women to whom I had given part of the crow came and gave me a ball of nardoo, saying that she would give me more only she had such a sore arm that she was unable to pound. She showed me a sore on her arm, and the thought struck me that I would boil some water in the billy and wash her arm with a sponge. During the operation the whole tribe sat round and were muttering one to another. Her husband sat down by her side, and she was crying all the time. After I had washed it I touched it with some nitrate of silver, when she began to yell, and ran off crying out 'Mokow! Mokow!' (Fire! Fire!); from this time she and her husband used to give me a small quantity of nardoo both night and morning, and whenever the tribe was about going on a fishing excursion he used to give me notice to go with them. They also used to assist me in making a wurley or breakwind*

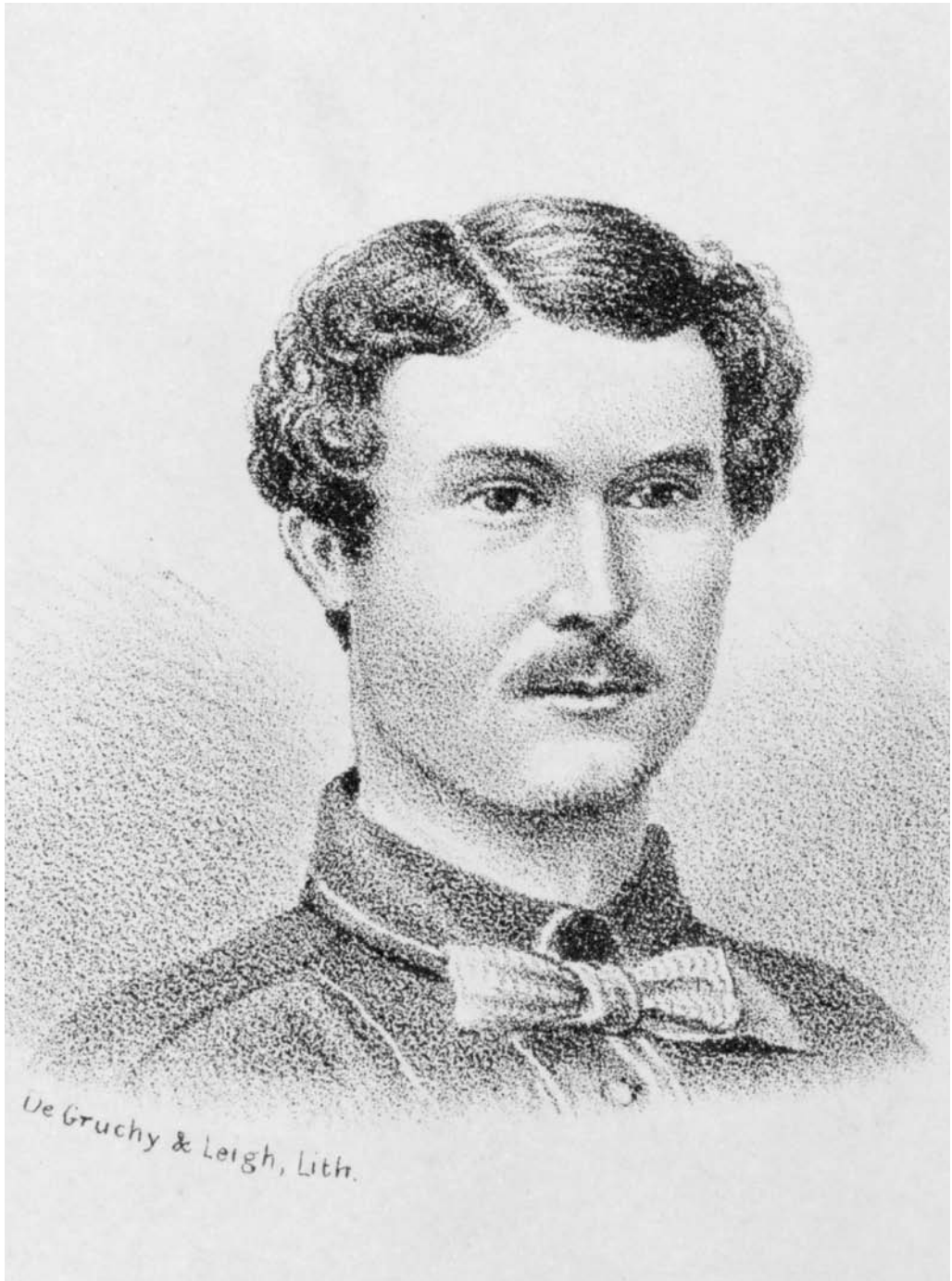


Figure 2.13: John King. De Gruchy & Leigh *John King*, 1861. Lithograph. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H37475/14.

*whenever they shifted camp. I generally shot a crow or a hawk, and gave it to them in return for these little services (Victoria 1861–62, p. 104).*

**Dost Mahomet, Belooch Khan, Esau Khan** and **Samla**, were the four Sepoy camel handlers employed as assistants to the expedition. Samla was a Hindu and Dost Mahomet, Belooch Khan and Esau Khan were Muslims. Samla left the expedition at Bulla on 22 August 1860, only three days into the journey. Becker provided an account of his departure:

*One of the Indians, Samla, begged of Mr. Landells to discharge him; his religion (being a Hindu) would not allow him to eat meat, except mutton, and this only if the sheep was killed by himself. The poor fellow looked very poorly indeed having had nothing for the last three days but bread and plenty of work. He saw it was impossible for him to remain with us without breaking his faith. After receiving the wages due to him he touched with his fingers mother Earth and then his forehead [sic], and blessing Mr Landells and the men near him, this good man went his way towards Melbourne, his eyes full of tears (Tipping 1979, p. 193).*

Esau Khan was a Baluchi from Qalat, Baluchistan (now Pakistan) and was dismissed at Swan Hill on account of illness (see Figure 2.14). Dost Mahomet was from Ghazni, Afghanistan and was part of the party that remained at the depot at Cooper Creek, under Brahe's charge. He 'had trouble in coping with the presence of Aborigines, of whom he had a mortal fear' (Rajkowski 1987, p. 10). Belooch Khan was a Parsi, probably from Baluchistan (see Figure 2.15). He was dismissed at Balranald but was reinstated and was left at Menindee under the charge of Wright.

## Bush experience unrecorded

The final group of expedition members comprised eleven men whose bush experience is unknown. **Thomas**

**McDonough, William Patten** and **Patrick Langan** were selected as members of the expedition and **James McIlwaine, James Robert Lane** and **Brooks** were employed as assistants on the day of the expedition's departure; their earlier applications had been unsuccessful. Three hired wagon drivers – **William Cole, George Price** and **M. O'Brien** – were part of the original expedition when it departed on Monday 20 August 1860. A fourth wagon driver, **Frederick Morrison**, was hired at Swan Hill on 10 September 1860. Very little is known about the four wagon drivers.

Little is known about the Irish-born **Thomas Francis McDonough**. Murgatroyd (2002, p. 70) claimed that McDonough may have been employed because he knew Burke in Ireland, was a friend of his in Castlemaine and claimed the leader as one of his 'particular friends' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 58). His bush experience is unrecorded. McDonough was left at the depot at Cooper Creek, under the charge of Brahe. During the Commission of Inquiry, McDonough was asked if the 'blacks at Cooper's Creek' alarmed him much:

*No, I have been with them; the first time we met them at the depot camp the sepoy came in in a very excited manner, and Mr Burke sent me out; the sepoy stated that the blackfellows were outside, he was trembling all over. I went out, I had my revolver and my gun out with me. There were about fifty of them, and they thought to feel my ribs to see if I was afraid, and I caught one and heaved him down and fired my revolver over his head and they ran away about one hundred yards distance. Did you fire at them? – No, only to frighten them. Then you did not as a party feel any particular dread of them? No, I never felt any dread of them; I knew they were cowardly and that a few shots would disperse them (Victoria 1861–62, p. 19).*

**Patrick Langan**, an Irish-born sawyer, cook and butcher, was employed as an



Figure 2.14: Isaah or Esau Khan, 1860. William Strutt. Pencil. Burke and Wills Sketchbook, Victorian Parliamentary Library.



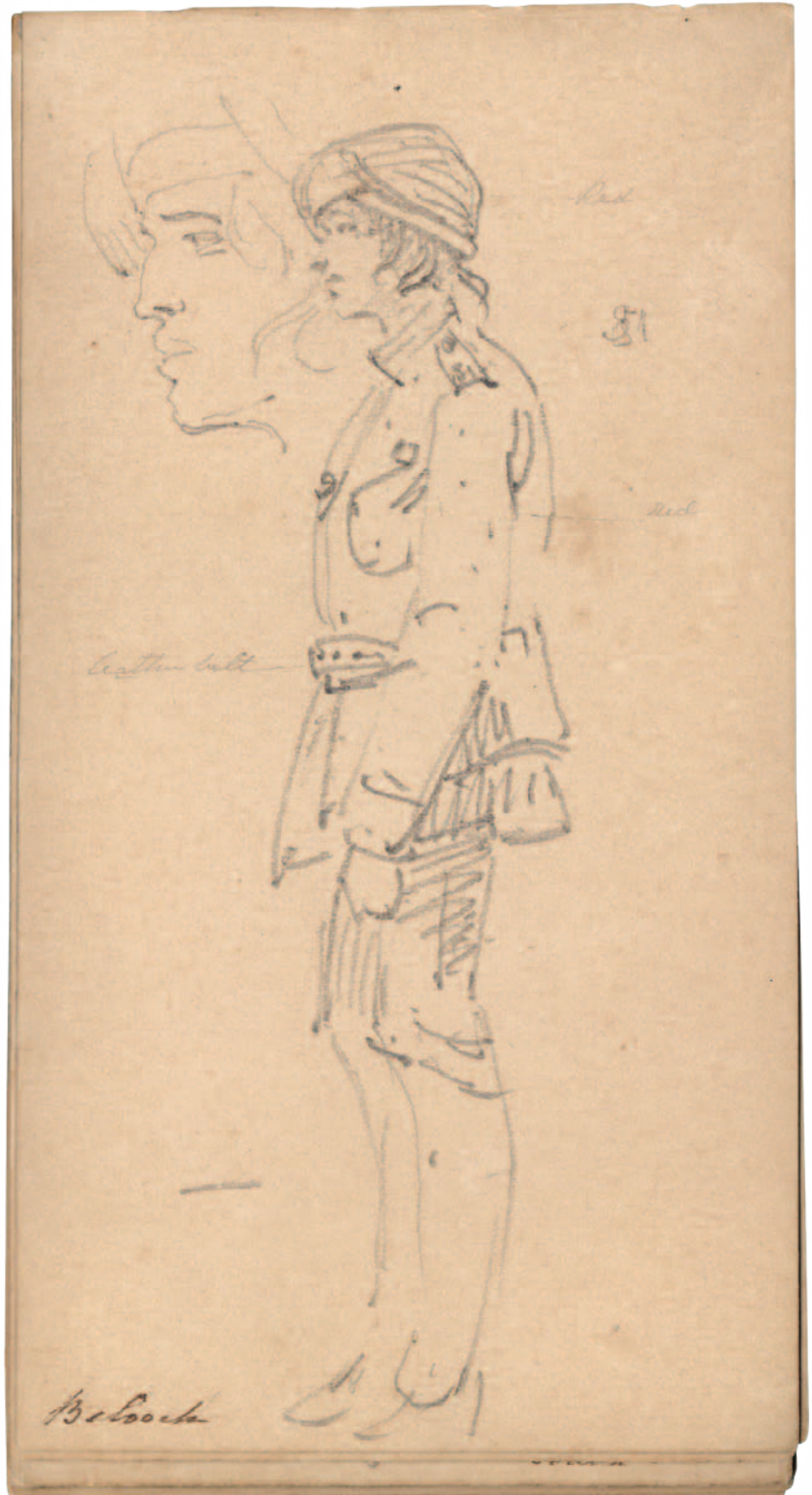


Figure 2.15:  
Belooch, 1860.  
William Strutt.  
Pencil. Burke and  
Wills Sketchbook,  
Victorian  
Parliamentary  
Library.

assistant to the expedition. Murgatroyd (2002, p. 70) claimed Langan was selected because he knew Burke in Castlemaine. His bush experience is unrecorded. He was discharged at Balranald on 14 September 1860. King reported he was sacked for 'bad conduct' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 91).

**William Patten**, an Irish blacksmith and armourer from Loughriscoes in County Down, was employed as an assistant to the expedition. Murgatroyd (2002, p. 70) claimed Patten's selection may be explained because he knew Burke in Ireland, although Bonyhady (1991, p. 58) suggested he was known to Burke in Castlemaine. His bush experience is unrecorded. Patten was left at the depot at Cooper Creek, under the charge of Brahe. He died near Rat Point, New South Wales, on 5 June 1861, from scurvy.

**James Robert Lane** was appointed to the expedition on 20 August 1860, the day of departure, as a wagon driver. He was discharged at Swan Hill on 6 September 1860. **Brooks** was also hired on the day of departure and discharged at Swan Hill on 6 September 1860. Very little is known about him – we do not even know his first name. **James McIlwaine** (born 1833) was discharged at Balranald on 16 September 1860.

## Conclusion

This analysis of the bush experience of the 30 men who at various times were members of the Victorian Exploring Expedition, in particular their interaction with Aboriginal peoples, has shown that the 19th-century view that almost to a man they were unsuited to their task is overly simplistic. At least six men who were chosen as part of the original expedition had bush experience – these include Becker, Beckler, Cowen, Drakeford, Ferguson and Fletcher. Unfortunately, four of them did not remain with the expedition for long: Cowen and Fletcher were dismissed before the expedition left Royal Park in Melbourne, Ferguson was dismissed at Balranald and Drakeford was dismissed

at Menindee. Of those who joined the expedition during its journey northwards, at least six men – Bowman, Gray, Purcell, Stone, Wright and presumably Smith – had bush experience. Bowman had probably the most experience of exploration, but he did not remain with the expedition long. In terms of interaction with Aboriginal peoples, at least 10 members had some experience: they included Wills, Becker, Beckler, Cowen, Bowman, Ferguson, Wright, Stone, Purcell and Smith. Cowen, who had been an officer in the Native Police Corps in Victoria, probably had the most experience, as a non-Aborigine, of working with and among Aboriginal people.

Seven men died during the expedition – Becker, Gray, Purcell, Stone, Patten, Burke and Wills – five of whom had varying degrees of bush experience and of dealing with Aboriginal peoples. Burke and Patten are not known to have possessed either. It therefore has to be acknowledged that neither previous bush experience nor prior experience of dealing with Aboriginal people could prevent five of the seven deaths. Allen (2011, p. 264) argued that the expedition's 'failure to fully observe how the Aborigines were living off the countryside was an important factor in the seven deaths. Dietary deficiencies in the form of scurvy [vitamin C deficiency] and beri-beri [a deficiency of thiamine, vitamin B1, in the diet] contributed to both the deaths and the illnesses'. Bonyhady (1991, p. 311) poignantly observed that 'More than any other event in nineteenth century Australia, the deaths of Burke and Wills at Cooper Creek have come to represent both the unwillingness of the Europeans to learn from the Aborigines and their more general inability to understand the land.'

## Endnotes

- 1 Professor Georg Balthasar Neumayer joined the expedition at Swan Hill and travelled with it as far as Bilbarka; however, given his tenure was never intended to be anything more than short-term he is not part of this chapter. Nor is



trooper Myles Lyons, who travelled with the expedition from Tragowel Station to Swan Hill (Feldtmann 1973, p. 105) and later attempted to deliver despatches to Burke, failing to do so and almost perishing. Several Aboriginal guides, such as Dick, Mountain, Peter, Bullingani, Sandy and Frank, were employed in New South Wales and Queensland; however, they are not considered in this chapter.

- 2 Translated, the title of the 1867 article is 'Corroboree: a contribution to the knowledge of music among the Australian population' and that of the 1872 article is 'The Aborigines of Australia'.
- 3 Tipping (1991, p. 92) identified these skulls as being those of King John, a youthful chief of the Adelaide tribe, another of a very old man from the Port Phillip district and the third of a member of the Warrnambool tribe.
- 4 Fels (1988) and other authors have 'Cowan'.
- 5 We can only wonder if any of these Aboriginal men were among the Aborigines who welcomed the expedition into Swan Hill in September 1860 and who 'seemed intoxicated with joy and excitement, and they came hurrying in to witness the wonderful cavalcade'. 'Benjamin Gummow's son recalled that some 400 local Aborigines staged a corroboree for the visitors' (Phoenix 2011a, p. 99).

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# ‘Exploring is a killing game only to those who do not know anything about it’: William Lockhart Morton and other contemporary views about the Victorian Exploring Expedition and its fate

*Ian D. Clark*

## Introduction

One of the most stinging critiques of the Royal Society of Victoria and its selection and management of the Burke and Wills Victorian Exploring Expedition came from one of its own members – William Lockhart Morton (see Figure 3.1). This chapter analyses 19th-century writings of the expedition through the prism of Morton’s critique. The consensus of historians who wrote during the expedition’s golden jubilee years was that the most significant failings of the various members of expedition were their inexperience with exploration, their lack of bush craft and their ignorance of the best ways to interact with Indigenous people. Alfred William Howitt, whose relief party found John King living with the Yandruwandha at Cooper Creek and who found the skeletal remains of Burke and



*Figure 3.1:* William Morton, n.d. Photographed T.F. Chuck. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H5056/277.

Wills, agreed with Morton's critique that the expedition members' lack of bush craft, especially in relation to a knowledge of Aboriginal people, was a vital factor in the disastrous outcome.

'Exploring is a killing game only to those who do not know anything about it' (*The Argus* 11 January 1862). This is a sentence in a letter to the editor of *The Argus* from William Lockhart Morton, a member of the Royal Society of Victoria who was openly critical of the lack of experience of most of the members of the Victorian Exploring Expedition. This chapter looks at the material written about the expedition, led by Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills, spanning its golden jubilee period from 1861 to 1911.<sup>1</sup> Many of the early histories of Victoria and Australia were concerned with the tragedy and misfortune of the expedition

which saw the death of seven members, including Burke and Wills (see Figure 3.2). Many sought explanations for the demise of Burke and Wills and put the blame on poor choices, human failings or simply 'bad luck'. Morton's critique will be contrasted with the early writings of the expedition and an assessment made of the extent to which his analysis was shared by other early commentators.

Early histories of the expedition included various newspaper pamphlets (*The Argus* 1861; *The Age* 1861; *The Herald* 1861); a seven-part newspaper series by William Lockhart Morton (*Yeoman and Australian Acclimatiser* 1861–62), Randell (1978), Jackson (1862), Wills (1863),<sup>2</sup> Pyke (1889) and Watson (1911). There are also publications by three expedition members – physician and botanical collector, Herman Beckler



Figure 3.2: Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H6417. Burke is on the right.

(Jeffries 1993); foreman, Charles Ferguson (1888) and expedition assistant William Brahe (1910) – and by Alfred William Howitt, who led one of the relief expeditions (Howitt 1901, 1907).<sup>3</sup> Georg Neumayer (1864), who joined the expedition for a short time, also left an account of his experiences with the expedition (see Figure 3.3).<sup>4</sup> There are official reports, despatches and letters prepared by various members of the expedition, such as Burke, Wills and Becker, and journals and diaries kept by various members, such as William Wright. It was also the subject of a Commission of Inquiry (Victoria 1862). The expedition is discussed in general histories of Australia and Victoria, such as Wildey (1876), Clarke (1877), Blair (1878), Allen (1882), Jenks (1896), Rusden (1897) and Turner (1904), and in general histories of exploration, including Tenison-Woods (1865), Favenc (1888, 1908), Grimm (1888), Long (1903) and Scott (1910). Blair (1878), Jenks (1896), Long (1903) and Watson (1911) presented descriptive accounts of the expedition and did not discuss in any detail what may have prevented the deaths of so many men.

Several 19th-century travellers discussed the expedition in published accounts of their experiences in Victoria (Aspinall 1862; Heywood 1863; Marquis de Beauvoir 1870; Barker 1872; Hill and Hill 1875; Cornish 1975 [1880]; Marin La Meslee 1979 [1883]; Lucas 1888; Comettant 1980 [1890]). Bickford (1878) discussed the expedition in his reminiscences of Christian missionary work in Australia.<sup>5</sup> The numerous visitors to Victoria in the latter half of the 19th century who discussed the expedition often did so in the context of the various monuments erected in memory of the exploring party. Clara Aspinall (1862, p. 237f), for example, visited Melbourne at the time of the expedition's departure and recalled it as a 'grand spectacle'. When she heard news of the death of Burke and Wills from starvation, she was filled with 'heart-felt sorrow'. 'Indeed, it is difficult to me to realise it, when

I think of that fine, noble-hearted man – the leader of the Expedition – as he appeared to me, shortly before he started, – looking replete with life and vigour ... and also, full of hope, as I saw him when he spoke to me of his anticipated explorings'. Heywood (1863, p. 116) considered the Aboriginal adoption of King corroborated the view that Aborigines 'would always feed a starving white man lost in the Bush, and pass him on to a Station'. Marquis de Beauvoir (1870, p. 55) considered that the monument in Melbourne consecrated the misfortune of the expedition, and that the magnitude of its disasters eclipsed the magnificence of its preparations. He formed the view that Burke was 'greedy of fame, and full of contempt for gain, fired with heroic ardour and almost exaggerated enthusiasm. But the excess of these qualities was the cause of his loss, and of those who went with him'. He was 'too impetuous, too anxious for the future, to be able to command with coolness' (Marquis de Beauvoir 1870, p. 56). Hill and Hill (1875, p. 264) commented that the natives had shown great kindness to Burke and Wills, and that King, who had fallen into their friendly hands, owed his life to them. They observed that among 'the illustrative groups sculptured on the monument the humanity of the blacks is commemorated'. Henry Cornish (1975, p. 115), an Anglo-Indian from Madras, considered the Melbourne monument an 'impressive tableaux' and his brief discussion of the expedition highlighted King's connection with India. Lucas (1888) presented a descriptive account of the expedition that took the form of a tribute to the courage and bravery of Burke and Wills. For Lady Barker (1872, p. 3), the Burke and Wills monument in Melbourne caused grief at the recollection of the lives 'sacrificed to carelessness and neglect of orders'. Barker (1872, p. 7f) noted, 'Looking at it dispassionately, and with the most earnest wish not to depreciate Mr. Burke's character or services, I cannot make myself think he was fitted to be the head of such





*Figure 3.3:* Professor Georg Balthasar Neumayer. Frederick Frith, 1864. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H3850.

an Expedition. He must have been from all accounts absolutely fearless of danger, of great physical strength, generous, loyal, and noble as any Paladin of old. But, alas! there is something more required for a leader of men.

There is forethought, decision, clearness, and conciseness in giving orders, and much more which cannot be set down here.' From the various accounts available, Barker (1872, p. 12) formed the view that Burke was 'hasty

in his judgements, sanguine, warm, and impulsive, a man to love, but not to follow'.

Tenison-Woods (1865, vol. 2, p. 349) considered the appointment of Burke was 'an unfortunate one, and but that the committee was composed of men who (with one exception)<sup>6</sup> knew little or nothing about exploration, it would have been inexcusable. Burke was not a bushman, knew nothing of the practical duties of a surveyor, had not been many years in the colony, and, as far as can be gathered, had not had his attention especially directed to Australian geography or exploration.' Jackson (1862, p. 8f) described how Burke, once appointed leader of the expedition, 'diligently prepared himself for it, by devoting himself, with his habitual energy, to qualifying for it in every possible way. He at once commenced an active examination of the records of previous explorers, so as to become thoroughly acquainted with whatever had befallen them, as well as to acquire such knowledge of the interior, and remote coasts, as had already been placed on record.' Wildey (1876, p. 246) observed that Burke was 'totally ignorant of bush life'; Allen (1882, p. 98) agreed that Burke 'had no bush experience, but was a man of great daring and indomitable courage'. Scott (1910, p. 309) concurred that Burke's 'lack of qualifications for the position was only too clearly proved by the uninterrupted sequence of blunder and disaster which makes up the story of the expedition ... He was no bushman; knew nothing of surveying.'

Marcus Clarke (1877, p. 201f) took the view that the expedition was part of 'a most glorious era in history of Australian discovery ... But it is sad to think that a few forgotten fishhooks would have preserved their lives.<sup>7</sup> It is lamentable to read of the blunders of some, the gross neglect of others, and of the series of appalling disasters which followed from inexperience, incapacity, and rashness.' Grimm (1888, p. 168) argued that although Burke was a 'brave and generous man', 'he

possessed little acquaintance with Australian exploration, and was destitute of special qualifications for the work, his appointment has generally been regarded as a mistake on the part of the committee'. Rusden (1897, vol. 2, p. 112) considered Burke lacked the kindly patriarchal control needed to win the affection of the native race, and lamented that the expedition was 'unaccompanied by an Australian native whose skill as a hunter would have spared the carried food for emergencies'. Turner (1904, vol. 2, p. 105) took the view that Burke, as leader, 'proved to be deficient in the necessary qualifications of tact and patience' and 'knew nothing of bush-craft or surveying, and was without any experience in dealing with the aborigines'.

The Commission of Inquiry of 1861–62, in a summary of its findings into the deaths of Burke, Wills and Gray, found that Burke had made an error of judgement in appointing Wright to an important command; that Burke's decision to depart from Cooper Creek for Carpentaria before Wright's depot party had arrived from Menindee was imprudent; that Wright's conduct in remaining so long at Torowoto was reprehensible; that the Exploration Committee of the Royal Society of Victoria committed errors of a serious nature in overlooking the importance of a despatch from Burke at Torowoto, and in not urging Wright's departure from the Darling; and that Brahe's decision to abandon the depot at Cooper Creek was 'most unfortunate'. It was also critical of Burke's failure to possess a systematic plan of operations (Victoria 1861–62). Curiously, the commission made no comment on the experience and qualifications of the men selected by the Exploration Committee, nor did it make any reference to the expedition's failure to use Aboriginal guides in a systematic way. Howitt (1907, 2007, p. 30), who led the relief expedition that discovered King and found the skeletal remains of Burke and Wills, agreed with the findings and attempted to explain Burke's failings as expedition leader – he believed Burke made

numerous errors of judgement because 'he did not possess that kind of knowledge which is absolutely necessary to enable even the bravest and most determined man to be the successful leader of such an expedition as was committed to his charge'. In a telling observation, he noted: 'The only way in which I can account for the inability of Burke, Wills, and King to do more for their sustenance than collect nardoo is that not one of them had bush experience or knowledge of the food which the natives procured. Among many other sources of supply there were fish, crayfish (yabbies), and mussels in the waterholes, and plenty of pigeons' (Howitt 2007, pp. 37–38).

Two members are on record as critical of aspects of the expedition and its leadership. Dr Herman Beckler, who was appointed to the expedition as its physician and botanical collector, expressed concern about Burke's appointment in personal correspondence. In a letter to his brother Carl, he commented that Burke was 'an ordinary person, certainly not an unattractive leader for me, but in no way adequate to his office. Leader of an expedition, but completely ignorant of the land, totally blind as to geography and astronomy. And this complete lack is not unknown to the Committee, or the Royal Society, or the Government or even the public ... A geographical expedition without [scientific] support is to proceed into the Australian interior without an astronomer, without a geologist ... What will be the result? – Nothing' (Beckler 1993, p. xxvi).<sup>8</sup> Charles Ferguson, the expedition's foreman, published his reminiscences almost 30 years after his resignation from the expedition and was equally unflattering of many of his colleagues. He commented on the difficulty of gaining government positions and how men unfit for positions were able to secure them nonetheless: 'knowing the difficulty there was in getting position in government affairs without powerful friends to back one, while at the same time there were plenty who could get

places, though no more fit than children, from having friends in the government or in the Royal Society' (Ferguson 1888, p. 382). Upon his appointment as foreman Ferguson commenced the task of 'breaking in' the men: 'for most of them were not only inexperienced but illy [sic] adapted by habits of life for the service. They were from England, Ireland and Scotland, and had come out with letters of introduction to people of influence in the colonies who felt under obligation to do something for them, and this was the grand opportunity and they embraced it. Most of them having been brought up "a gentleman," as the term is understood in England, they knew nothing of hard work, and, besides, they were one and all, as a matter of course, pre-eminently ignorant of frontier, or, as it is there called, bush life, and consequently wholly unfit for an expedition of that kind' (Ferguson 1888, p. 385).<sup>9</sup> Ferguson recalled a remark he made in answer to Burke seeking his opinion of the men: 'I told him if I could have my way I would select my men from some of the old experienced bush-men in the prison, rather than start out across the continent with such raw recruits; that I did not believe one-half of them could harness up a team and drive it. And my assertion proved even more true, for there was not even one man among them that could put together a four-horse team and drive it afterwards' (Ferguson 1888, p. 386).

Beckler and Ferguson were critical of the choices made by the Royal Society of Victoria, but the harshest criticism came from a Royal Society member, William Lockhart Morton. Morton was one of the unsuccessful candidates for leadership of the expedition (Bonyhady 1991, p. 74) and, while this may have prejudiced his view of the successful candidate, Burke, and other members of the exploration party, his views deserve to be considered.<sup>10</sup> William Wills (1863, p. 91), the father of William J. Wills, alluding to the criticisms of Morton and others, referred to the disquiet surrounding Burke's appointment thus: 'Mr. Burke's

appointment called forth discussions and strong comments in the Melbourne papers. Gentlemen who considered their own qualifications as superior to his, and their friends who thought with them, expressed their opinions with more ardour than justice or delicacy in their respective organs'.

## William Lockhart Morton's public debate

William Lockhart Morton had explored a large portion of the unoccupied northern districts of Queensland in the late 1850s, and read a paper entitled 'Notes of a recent personal visit to the unoccupied and northern districts of Queensland' before the Royal Society on 23 January 1860 (*The Argus* 24 January 1860). In the audience were various members of the Victorian Exploring Expedition. Morton explained that he discussed 'particulars of the grand, but waterless, country we had seen, and furnished such information as I thought might be useful to the explorers about to start, knowing that they possessed little, if any, bush knowledge or experience' (Randell 1978, p. 167).<sup>11</sup> This lack of bush craft was something Morton was particularly concerned about; in June 1861, he sent a letter to *The Argus* in which he called attention to the ominous absence of news from the expedition, 'pointing out, that although under ordinary circumstances there would have been no occasion for anxiety, in their case the want of bush knowledge and experience might lead to a terrible disaster – such as I had publicly forecast before the expedition left Melbourne, but in vain' (Randell 1978, p. 173).

Over the next 12 months Morton conducted an open debate through the pages of *The Argus* in which he called for an inquiry into all matters connected with the management of the ill-fated expedition. He also published an account of the expedition in a seven-part newspaper series in the *Yeoman and Australian Acclimatiser* (1861–62). Others who joined the fray included Professor Georg Neumayer (*The Argus* 23

April 1861), Dr Thomas Embling (*The Argus* 24 April 1861), W.R. Whitehorn, an expatriate South African explorer (*The Argus* 8 January 1862, 16 January 1862), a contributor using the nom de plume 'Sohoben' (*The Argus* 10 July 1861), and squatter E.M. Curr (*The Argus* 16 January 1862).<sup>12</sup> Morton was one of the first to analyse the fate of the expedition and consider what actions may have prevented the loss of life. Specifically, he argued that there would have been no loss of life if the following issues had been addressed satisfactorily by the Royal Society: 'first, by starting at the proper season from the Darling; secondly, by making such prudent and definite arrangements and calculations as were necessary for a successful and safe return; and, thirdly, that all the party should not have been new chums, but such thorough bushmen, that if everything else failed, they could live as well as the aboriginal inhabitants' (*The Argus* 5 November 1861).

Morton explained his argument in more detail in other letters to the newspaper. He was particularly critical of Wright's and Brahe's inability to discern the differences between Aboriginal camp fires and non-Aboriginal camp fires, when they returned to the Dig tree at the Cooper Creek depot and were unable to tell that Burke's party had been there:

*With the exception of Mr. Wright, I believe none of the party pretended to be experienced bushmen, and it therefore cannot be reflection against either the living or the dead to refer to their want of bushmanship. Even when by want of arrangement and want of a proper understanding, Mr. Burke's party returned to the abandoned camp, and were every day fast perishing from want, had Messrs. Brahe and Wright been sharp, observant bushmen, they must, upon their return to the Cooper's Creek camp, have noticed that Burke's party or some other white men had been there. These gentlemen have stated that they saw several places where there had been fires, as they*



*thought, made by blacks. Any bushman knows how absurd this is, and how fully it proclaims their want of bush knowledge or bush skill in observing. A black fellow's fire is no more like that of a white man's than a gum tree is like a pine (The Argus 6 November 1861).*

Furthermore, Morton believed experienced bushmen did not perish from starvation:

*There can be but one opinion amongst experienced and intelligent men as to the want of bush knowledge displayed by the various members of the late exploration party, and all such must own that wherever there is water, no really good bushman – who has always a thousand resources within himself – can die of starvation in any part of Australia (The Argus 4 January 1862).*

Of the various members of the expedition, Morton held the following view:

*Then, as to the total inexperience of the members of the whole party, from the leader downwards, I shall not have the slightest difficulty in adducing proofs. None of them knew how to travel, none of them knew how to provide themselves with food, and none of them knew how to act towards the tribes of aboriginals they came in contact with. It was undoubtedly this total absence of bush knowledge which ultimately proved fatal to Burke and Wills ...*

*But from want of bush knowledge, with plenty of fish hooks up to the very last – for I find some were given to the blacks a few days before Burke and Wills died – when the three survivors were cast upon their own resources, two of them died of want where an experienced bushman could have found plenty of food. The numerous tribes of blacks at Cooper's Creek do not live without food, and I shall prove from Howitt that there is plenty of food there for those who know how to procure it. That the party did not know how to treat the blacks can be*

*fully proved by one extract from King's narrative. After stating that he had fired his revolver over a black-fellow's head through what appears to have been a groundless fear of his attacking him, he says, 'Mr. Burke, hearing the report, came back, and we saw no more of them till late that night, when they came with some cooked fish, and called out "white fellow". Mr. Burke then went out with his revolver, and found a whole tribe coming down, all painted, and with fish in small nets, carried by two men. Mr. Burke went to meet them, and they wished to surround him, but he knocked as many of the nets of fish out of their hands as he could, and shouted out to me to fire. I did so, and they ran off. We collected five small nets of cooked fish. The reason he would not accept the fish from them was that he was afraid of being too friendly, lest they should always be at our camp.' The fears which made them treat the blacks after this fashion were undoubtedly wholly groundless. If they had meant to attack the 'white fellows' they would not have brought cooked fish with them.*

*When Brahe was examined before the commission of inquiry, I find him making the following most extraordinary admission, as appears in page 8 of the published pamphlet. When asked about the fish in Cooper's Creek, he said – 'We only got a few fish. We could only catch them by bailing out waterholes. There were abundance of fish, but none of us knew how to catch them'. Yet in the same Cooper's Creek, from which the depot party had to retreat for want of provisions, and where Burke and Wills died of want, Howitt mentions that from three o'clock in the afternoon till sunset two of his men caught 72lb. weight of fish.<sup>13</sup> Brahe further states, in the same page, 'I have no experience with blacks, nor had any of those with me.' Again, as will be found in page 10, when asked*



about his return with Wright to Cooper's Creek, whether he did not see tracks and fire-places (those of Burke and Wills, who had by that time returned from Carpentaria), he further shows his want of bush experience by saying he saw no tracks, as there had been so many rats about. Why, the first thing that a bushman does if he wants to know if any blacks have been near, is to examine the edge of the water-holes. Again, he says – 'There is a good deal of difference between the tracks of white men and natives. Of course, if the white men were barefooted, I could not have seen the difference'. Why, the barefooted tracks of a white man are totally different from those of the natives; in the tracks of the latter the greatest width of the foot is at the extremities of the toes, are nearly all of the same length.

*I think I have ... proved that the whole of the party started by the committee did not possess the requisite bush knowledge or experience, and that, had this been otherwise, Burke and Wills need not have perished of want, and Brahe need not have abandoned the depot at Cooper's Creek ... (The Argus 3 February 1863).<sup>14</sup>*

Morton described the best way to interact with Aboriginal people when exploring in remote regions. He even recommended the kind of shot to use when needing to fire upon Aborigines:

*The attack of savages is sudden and unexpected, and in those few parts where they are numerous and ferocious they require to be watched – that is, your camp must be watched by night; but what would be the wisdom of springing Catherine-wheels all night long!<sup>15</sup> No doubt the savages would be frightened by anything that might appear to them as supernatural, but the blackfellow is not such a fool as to be long deceived. The best way is to keep them at a proper distance – have no familiarities with*

*them; show to them that you are not to be trifled with. Shooting at blacks is, of course, always to, if possible, be avoided, and it is very seldom necessary where order and regularity are maintained in a party; and then, when they must be fired upon, the kind of shot known as AA is the best – it stings but does not kill. Neither revenge nor any other feeling will induce them to attack the same party, unless a chance be given them (The Argus 4 January 1862).*

Morton's assessment of King's survival was pragmatic: 'King, of the Burke and Wills exploring party, was kindly treated by the same Cooper's Creek blacks, and so would the leaders themselves if they had not frightened the blacks by firing over their heads when they came up with an offering of cooked fish; but King was destitute of worldly goods, and there was nothing to be gained by killing him' (Randell 1978, pp. 154–155).

## The contribution of 'Sohoben'

On 10 July 1861, *The Argus* published a letter, titled 'Blacks and Exploration', under the nom de plume 'Sohoben'. It is worth quoting in full:

*Will you give publicity to what I have to say relating to the exploring party? Some eight months ago I saw Mr. Burke and party leave here on their arduous undertaking, for arduous I admit it to be. I then stated the end would be grief, as I plainly saw the men were not up to the achievement of the great task they had undertaken; for they omitted one of their most essential requirements, and which men accustomed to their work never would have been guilty of – they neglected to take blacks with them. Such men as Leichhardt, Mitchell, Kennedy, and others, knew too well the worth of the natives, in bush travelling, to go without them. For the truth of what I state I refer you to history, for even the aboriginals*

*are historical. In what position would the lamented Leichhardt have been, in hundreds of instances, had blacks not been part of the party? The only man saved out of Kennedy's party was the black Jaka Jaka; and Sir Thomas Mitchell in all his expeditions had blacks with him.*

*I am convinced of the valuable services of these men on such expeditions, that I would never think of starting without them; and had Mr. Burke taken these men with him, both himself and party would have been in a different position at this moment; we should not have to send relieving parties after him. Well known to every old colonist, who has travelled in Australia, is the inestimable value of blacks – their intuitive instinct in finding water, food, in tracking, and their knowledge of the habits of other tribes, and their facility of obtaining information from them, which is perfectly out of the power of whites to do, unless half aboriginals themselves by training – something like the volunteers are like soldiers of the line. And now, Sir, to show you what faith is (by experience), I would start for the Gulf of Carpentaria tomorrow, with a party of eight (four whites and four blacks), at one-tenth of the cost of the late expedition. Yes, accomplish it, too. There should be no 'ifs' in the case; succeed I would. I beg to remain yours faithfully, SOHOBEN.*

The identity of Sohoben is unknown – it is possibly Morton, but this seems unlikely as he was never afraid of controversy and had no need to use a nom de plume. Nor does it appear to be Alfred Howitt: in his 1907 address he stated that he was in Gippsland exploring the upper Mitchell River at the time of the expedition's departure from Melbourne whereas Sohoben witnessed its departure from Royal Park. Whereas Morton was critical of the selection of the various expedition members because of their lack of bush craft, Sohoben was critical of the fact that Aboriginal guides were not an essential

part of the expedition from its beginning. This issue is considered in further detail in Chapters 4 and 15.

## Conclusion

The most articulate critic of the selection of the various members of the expedition, particularly of its leaders, was William Lockhart Morton, a member of the Royal Society of Victoria. Although it may be tempting to set aside Morton's views as little more than sour words from an unsuccessful applicant for the position of expedition leader, the support his views received from other contemporary critics associated with the expedition, such as Beckler, Howitt and Ferguson, means that his arguments cannot be dismissed so readily. Morton's argument is straightforward – that the expedition members should have possessed sufficient bush craft that if everything went awry they would be able to live as well as local Aboriginal people. It was evident that Burke, Wills, Gray and King did not possess such bush craft; Gray, Wills and Burke died on the return trip from Carpentaria, and King owed his survival to the local Yandruwandha people of Cooper Creek who willingly took him into their care. Beckler and Ferguson both commented on Burke's ignorance of the land. When Howitt was at Cooper Creek he identified many sources of food other than nardoo, such as fish, yabbies mussels and pigeons, and could only explain the demise of Burke and Wills by asserting that none had 'bush experience or knowledge of the food which the natives procured'. Associated with this absence of bush craft was an ignorance of dealing with Aboriginal people. Turner (1904) found this ignorance particularly lamentable. The commission (Victoria 1861–62) failed to comment on the bush experience and qualifications of the expedition members selected by the Exploration Committee. Tenison-Woods (1865) noted that the committee knew little of exploration and therefore its selections were excusable. However, Morton was less

forgiving, and had little doubt where blame lay for the various deaths associated with the Victorian expedition.

In July 2011, Coroner Dr Jane Hendtlass conducted a 'mock' coronial inquiry into the deaths of Robert O'Hara Burke, William John Wills and Charles Gray. Her findings were presented in April 2012. The coroner found that the:

*... primary cause of deaths of Mr Burke, Mr Wills and Mr Gray was nutritional inadequacy including starvation and beriberi associated with thiamine deficiency. This failure to provide enough food for the four men for the journey to the Gulf and back to Cooper Creek was totally attributable to Mr Burke's lack of suitability for the role of leader of the Exploring Expedition. He was authoritarian, unschooled and inexperienced. He made mathematical mistakes in calculating how much and what food he needed to take with him. He refused to consult with indigenous people who knew how to manage toxicity associated with eating nardoo (Hendtlass 2012, pp. 30–31).*

The coroner did not absolve the Expedition Committee from responsibility: 'the Expedition Committee knew or should have known about the risks they were exposing the Expedition to in sending them across Australia in the summer, they knew Mr Burke's limitations as the leader of Expedition in those circumstances' (Hendtlass 2012, p. 31). William Lockhart Morton would have felt vindicated by the 2012 coronial findings.

## Endnotes

- 1 Wills was originally appointed third-in-command as geographer and astronomical observer at the commencement of the expedition, however, with the resignation of George Landells he became second-in-command.
- 2 This publication by William Wills, the

father of W.J. Wills, is based on his son's journal and letters.

- 3 This chapter does not consider non-English histories that were published in the 19th century. There are various publications associated with the relief expeditions, but for the sake of brevity we will focus only on the Victorian Exploring Expedition.
- 4 Neumayer wasn't the only European to travel with the expedition on a short-term basis. Trooper Myles Lyons guided the expedition from Tragowel Station to Swan Hill, and Police Superintendent Henry Foster and two troopers accompanied the party from Swan Hill to Balranald (Feldtmann 1973).
- 5 Bickford's (1878, p. 129f) brief account is of interest as he discusses what King told him about Burke's last moments. Bickford considered that Burke and Wills were 'examples of manful heroism and fidelity in the discharge of public duty'.
- 6 Angus Macmillan, who had explored Gippsland extensively in the 1830s. This claim merits further consideration as it would seem that other members of the Exploration Committee, such as Ferdinand Mueller and William Blandowski, had exploration experience.
- 7 Clarke's comment assumes the explorers knew how to use the fish hooks, but this seems not to be the case (see below).
- 8 Beckler resigned at Menindee but agreed to remain until a replacement was organised; one never eventuated.
- 9 Ferguson is exaggerating, as it seems Robert Fletcher was the only 'gentleman' on the expedition (see Bonyhady 1991).
- 10 Randell (1978, p. 7) considered Morton was censorious and often gave the impression that 'he was the only man in the regiment marking in step'. 'Today Morton would be said to have a chip on his shoulder'. Bonyhady (1991, pp. 41–42) summarised the views of the Melbourne press towards Burke's appointment,

and the views of those who knew Burke personally during his years as a police chief.

- 11 The meeting of 30 members was chaired by Dr Ferdinand von Mueller. Dr Ludwig Becker seconded the motion of thanks to W.L. Morton.
- 12 Neumayer and Embling were members of the Exploration Committee.
- 13 Howitt (2007, p. 37) commented that he 'never could understand how it was that Burke, Wills, and King did not catch fish, for King had hooks when we found him'.
- 14 Two of Morton's letters were reproduced in Milton's (1863) pamphlet. Milton is an interesting source, as he was in the Darling River area in late 1860 and was pressured by fellow workers to join the expedition as it passed through.
- 15 Whitehorn had recommended this strategy.

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# The use and abuse of Aboriginal ecological knowledge

*Philip A. Clarke*



## Introduction

Prior to the irreversible social and environmental changes to Australia brought on by European settlement, Aboriginal hunter-gatherers relied upon strategies to survive that were heavily built around their understanding of country, and in particular their detailed knowledge of ecological processes. The plants and animals that, together with the minerals, were sources of raw materials to make food, medicine and artefacts were not randomly placed within the landscape, but sparsely distributed in ways that Aboriginal people keenly understood. There was no specific body of knowledge within Aboriginal tradition that was equivalent to the study of ecology in Western science, although the experience and familiarity that hunter-gatherers had with the Australian biota was immense. Knowledge of

the relationships between organisms and the environment was encoded in their Creation traditions.

The life of Australian hunter-gatherers in the desert was nomadic, which maximised their efforts in making a living while maintaining a low level of physical impact upon the fragile environment. Accordingly, Aboriginal land 'owners' possessed highly developed skills in observing temporal changes and spatial patterns within their country, which is seen in the formulation of their seasonal calendars. European explorers recognised that the Indigenous inhabitants had an intimacy with the land, and they took advantage of this by recruiting Aboriginal companions to their expeditions. These Indigenous men performed various crucial roles, such as guide, tracker, protector and procurer of food and water. In carrying out their duties, their possession of ecological

knowledge was essential. It is argued in this chapter that in the case of the Victorian Exploring Expedition, led by Robert O'Hara Burke and William J. Wills, the lack of Aboriginal members in the small team that made the return trip from Cooper Creek to the Gulf of Carpentaria seriously jeopardised the outcome. The explorers had denied themselves a convenient way of accessing local ecological knowledge.

## Aboriginal ecological knowledge

When Europeans arrived in Australia, the desert country was home to Aboriginal groups who to varying degrees were related by kinship and who shared common Creation mythologies and material culture traditions (Clarke 2003, 2007). Key areas within the arid centre of Australia provided refuges for hunters and gatherers during times of extreme hardship. In terms of the movements of people, the Cooper Creek system, with its string of water holes crossing the corners of Queensland and South Australia, was like a pulsating heart. Here, bands of people from groups such as the Diyari and Yandruwandha moved out into the desert in search of food after rains had fallen, then retreated back to their camps along Cooper Creek in times of drought.<sup>1</sup> By constantly moving across their country during good seasons, Aboriginal people reduced their overall impact upon the environment, allowing the land to recover from the short-term effects of their foraging activities. Ecological knowledge was important in choosing a time to set fire to the scrub to hunt and in deciding when to risk leaving safe waters to access more remote environmental resources (Kimber 1984; Latz 1995). As part of group-memory, this knowledge was encoded in Aboriginal Creation accounts involving the Muramura (Dreaming) Ancestors, which were told in song (Horne and Aiston 1924; Howitt and Siebert 1904; Jones and Sutton 1986). Aboriginal people believed that certain individuals were 'rain-makers' who held the ritual power to alter weather and bring water

to their country (Clarke 2009; Elkin 1977; McCarthy 1953). During severe droughts, the memories of older group members were crucial when trying to predict where to find food and water.

Aboriginal groups living along Cooper Creek and pushing into the surrounding areas had a distinctive toolkit. The area was part of a region where people did not generally use throwing spears. Researchers George Horne and George Aiston (1924, p. 79) noted that among Aboriginal people at Cooper Creek, 'The spear does not seem to have been a very popular weapon ... They had the long, pole-like spear called *piranburra*, made out of a box-tree root or mulga root, and employed it as much for digging as for any other purpose'. According to these authors, spears requiring a spearthrower were not generally made in this area, although a few came in via trade with Arrernte people to the north-west. For weapons of defence and killing game, the Cooper Creek people relied heavily upon a variety of handheld and throwing clubs, as well as fighting staves (Horne and Aiston 1924; Jones 1996).<sup>2</sup> Other essential tools were the digging-stick used chiefly by women, and a range of bags made from string and animal skins for carrying food, water, implements and other objects. In spite of being in a desert region, Cooper Creek possessed large water holes rich in fish life (Glover 1990). A finely woven net of plant fibres was attached to stakes at 2 m intervals and stretched across a water hole to gill net fish during the night.

In the arid zone, grindstones and pounders were essential tools for processing small hard-coated food sources, such as seeds, which enabled larger groups to live in the desert than would otherwise be possible (McBryde 1987; Tindale 1977) (see Figure 4.1). In the Cooper Creek area, grinding (or milling) stones were typically slabs of rounded hard sandstone approximately 50 cm long, 30 cm wide and 4 cm or more thick.<sup>3</sup> The pounder was made from similar

hard stone material and of the size to fit into a hand. Being large, heavy and awkward to carry, the grindstone slabs were generally left behind at each of the main seasonal camps near water holes (Horne and Aiston 1924). In Australian popular literature these Central Australian grinding stones are often simply called 'nardoo stones' (Ramson 1988).

Hunter-gatherers across the world typically have diets comprising a large number of plant and animal species, making the identification of staple foods problematic. In Australia, with its variable climate, certain foods were relied upon almost exclusively when the seasons of flood or drought had limited access to most other sources. Nardoo, because of its abundance and availability during droughts, was a major 'hard time' food source for Aboriginal foragers in parts of arid Australia (see Figure 4.2). It is a small low-growing waterfern with clover-

like leaves, that springs up in the mudflats after infrequent rains. Nardoo forms dense mats of vegetation that soon die off to leave behind sporocarps, which are flattened pea-shaped spore cases up to 5 mm in diameter. The dark hard outer coverings of these seed-like growths enclose a yellowish powder that has a bitter taste. Aboriginal foragers generally gathered sporocarps from dry mud after the plants had died (Bates 1918; Cleland 1957; Cleland *et al.* 1925; Cleland and Johnston 1937–38; Gason 1879; Johnston and Cleland 1943; Kemsley 1951; Kimber 1984; Riches 1964; Roth 1897; Spencer 1918; Worsnop 1897).<sup>4</sup> At Cooper Creek, explorer/anthropologist Alfred W. Howitt (cited in Smyth 1878, vol. 2, p. 302) claimed that nardoo 'may be called their "stand-by" when other food is scarce. In many places, miles of the clay flats are thickly sprinkled with the dry seeds [sporocarps]' (see Figure 4.3).



*Figure 4.1:* Grindstone. For desert dwellers, a stone slab such as this was essential for removing the hard outer coverings of nardoo sporocarps and grass seeds. The resulting meal was cooked into damper. Philip A. Clarke, Alton Downs, north-east of South Australia, 1987.





*Figure 4.2:* Nardoo plant. This small arid-zone fern grows in dense mats on the mudflats after rain, leaving behind the dried dark and split pea-shaped nardoo spore cases on the dry mud. Philip A. Clarke, Diamantina, north-east South Australia, 1986.





*Figure 4.3:* Linda Crombie collecting nardoo. Without this labour-intensive food source, Aboriginal people would not have been able to remain in the deserts during long-term droughts. Philip A. Clarke, Diamantina, north-east South Australia, 1986.

A meal of nardoo sporocarps, even in dried form, is rendered edible only after extensive preparation involving pounding, sluicing and baking into cakes (Basedow 1925; Bonyhady 1991; Earl and McCleary 1994; Horne and Aiston 1924; Murgatroyd 2002). The protracted process is necessary due to the presence of thiaminase, which is an enzyme that blocks thiamine (vitamin B1) absorption in human bodies (Earl and McCleary 1994; Everist 1981; McCleary and Chick 1977; Moran 2004). The highest levels of enzyme activity are found in green growing plants. Bancroft investigated how Aboriginal people at Annandale in south-west Queensland prepared nardoo:

*The involucre [sporocarps], which are very hard, are pounded between two stones; a handful of them is held in the left hand and fed to a stone on the ground, a few grains being allowed to drop from the hand by separating, abducting the little finger, a smart blow being struck with a stone in the right hand, which effectively pulverises every grain at once; it is surprising with what rapidity they can do this work. The flour is mixed with water, kneaded to a dough, and baked in the ashes (Bancroft 1894, p. 216).*

The Ngardu-etya and Anti-etya Dreaming of the Yandruwandha people at Cooper Creek celebrated the creation of grindstones and the use of nardoo (*ngardu*) sporocarps and grass seed (Howitt 1904).<sup>5</sup>

The availability of nardoo sporocarps and their ability to grind it enabled desert dwellers to remain in country that experienced long dry periods. Grindstones for pounding were typically used close to water sources near mudflats where the nardoo grows (Clarke 2007; Thomson 1962). The production of flour through grinding was laborious, with the 'tap-tap' of the process heard from the camps far into the night (Howitt, cited in Maiden 1889; Lees 1915). In the Diyari language of north-east South Australia, *pita-ru* was the lament of

hard-working women during droughts; it meant 'always-pounding' (Reuther 1981). Nardoo and other closely related species are found widely across Australia, although the use of sporocarps for food appears to have been completely avoided in regions outside the desert. Apart from nardoo, the seed of various grasses, portulaca (munyeroo) (see Figure 4.4) and various wattles were ground to produce meal in the desert.

In Aboriginal Australia, no single territory occupied by one Aboriginal group would have provided everything that was required for long-term survival. Trading allowed goods, such as nets and weapons made from sources in restricted areas, to be distributed for use throughout a much larger region (Clarke 2003; McCarthy 1938–40). Horne and Aiston stated that Kopperamanna, in the bed of Cooper Creek in north-east South Australia, was a major place for barter, where 'Thither came from the north the soft-wood shields, for none of this soft-wood [batwing coral tree] grows amongst the Lake Eyre tribes' (Horne and Aiston 1924, p. 34) (see Figure 4.5).<sup>6</sup> The shields had been traded into their country from many hundreds of kilometres to the north. In eastern Central Australia, a narcotic made from the pituri shrub was a highly prized trade item, with the superior leaves and sticks coming from the Mulligan River area of south-west Queensland (Basedow 1925; Clarke 2003, 2007; Hicks 1963; Smyth 1878; Watson 1983). Apart from its recreational use, for Aboriginal men the pituri was said 'to excite their courage in warfare' (Von Mueller, cited in Smyth 1878, vol. 1, p. 223) and it was given to male initiates prior to ceremony to heighten their sense of revelation (Latz 1995). As a stimulant, it was claimed to create sensations of well-being, and as a narcotic it suppressed hunger and thirst, such as that experienced during protracted hunting expeditions.

Ochre, important in Aboriginal ritual and painting, was a major trade item throughout Aboriginal Australia (Peterson and Lampert





*Figure 4.4:* Portulaca, also known as common pigweed or munyeroo. A succulent creeper that bears edible seed, which is as fine and black as gunpowder. The leaves and stems were used by desert dwellers as thirst-quenchers. Explorers ate this plant as greens to battle scurvy. Philip A. Clarke, Tennant Creek, Northern Territory, 2011.



*Figure 4.5:* Batwing coral tree (beantree). The light-weight timber is soft and therefore easily carved into shields and containers. Philip A. Clarke, Alice Springs, MacDonnell Ranges, Northern Territory, 2007.

1985; Sagona 1994). Parties of men from Cooper Creek went on long trading trips south to the mines at Pukardu (Bookatoo) near Parachilna in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia (Cooper 1948; Jones 1984, 2007; McBryde 1987; Wilhelmi 1861). The expeditions took two months and involved participants travelling about 500 km before commencing the return trip to Cooper Creek. Trade, based on this source of red ochre, connected people from as far north as south-west Queensland and the MacDonnell Ranges, and possibly as far south as the Adelaide Plains and Port Lincoln. The ochre is not bright red, but rather a metallic pink which is shiny when applied to human skin.

### Aboriginal gatekeepers of ecological knowledge

The first British colonists in Australia encountered a land that was strange in comparison to their homelands. Many of the plants and animals appeared exotic (Finney 1984; Moyal 1986) and the seasons were different too (Reid 1995a, b). To Europeans, Australia was a 'new' land to explore, claim, settle and develop (Clarke 2008; Griffiths 1997). Although treated as an unoccupied wilderness, the continent had actually been shaped by its Indigenous inhabitants over many thousands of years. Aboriginal foraging practices that involved the use of fire kept large areas open for travellers (Clarke 2003, 2007; Hallam 1975; Latz 1995). Explorers, knowingly or otherwise, took advantage of this. For European travellers, Aboriginal pathways were a particular advantage to finding key places, such as water holes, and when moving pack animals across the country. As settlement spread across the continent, Aboriginal tracks were incorporated into stock routes and many eventually became part of the modern road system (Clarke 2003, 2008).

Survival of the explorers at key moments during each expedition hinged upon how the Indigenous inhabitants received them. In the early days of colonisation, Aboriginal

guides were essential, being relied upon for their knowledge and experience of the different environments and Indigenous peoples. In their service to the explorers they found pathways, established protocols with Aboriginal land owners to allow expedition parties safe passage, collected scientific specimens and on occasion were even bodyguards (Clarke 2008). Aboriginal interpreters were necessary, as social conditions in the newly established towns and rural areas did not favour the colonists learning to speak a variety of Indigenous dialects (Donaldson 1985). In times of shortage, explorers called upon their Aboriginal guides to use the land to provide food and water, as well as for making shelter and watercraft. Explorers looking for indications that the country they traversed was suitable for agriculture considered large numbers of local Aboriginal people to be both a physical threat and a good sign that the land was fertile.

In employing Indigenous guides, explorers could either recruit Aboriginal men from settled areas to be part of the expedition, or opportunistically fall in with those they met during their travels and acquire local knowledge directly from them (Clarke 2003; McLaren 1996). Some explorers used both strategies simultaneously. By employing Aboriginal guides at the outset, expedition leaders gained companions who had time to develop familiarity with their needs. A disadvantage of this strategy was that the expertise of these guides was most concentrated upon the culture, language and environmental resources of their own territory, which the expedition would sooner or later leave behind. On the positive side, Aboriginal people who, as individuals, had lived as hunter-gatherers before Europeans arrived, possessed bush skills and general ecological knowledge of landscapes that could be broadly applied across the continent.

Indigenous guides were recruited from survivors of the early waves of British

colonisation. They were present at pivotal points of early Australian exploration history. Explorers routinely took Aboriginal companions, forming partnerships such as Mathew Flinders and Boongaree, George Grey and Kaiber, John Mitchell and Barney, Edward Eyre and Wylie, Edmund Kennedy and Jackey Jackey, Ludwig Leichhardt and Charley Fisher, Peter Warburton and Charley, Ernest Giles and Jimmy, and John Forrest and Windich (Clarke 2008; McLaren 1996; Reynolds 1990). From the early 19th century, many of these men were issued with breastplates, mostly brass and copper, as medals to acknowledge their efforts (Cleary 1993; Troy 1993).

## The expedition and Aboriginal ecological knowledge

The Victorian Exploring Expedition took place in a period when the involvement of Aboriginal guides with explorers was declining, perhaps due to a desire to rely more upon newly available technologies, such as mapping instruments and superior weapons. When Burke received news of John McDouall Stuart's apparent good progress on his parallel route across Australia, the expedition was transformed from a scientific exercise into a race. The original plan to wait for a benign season to cross the continent's unmapped interior was abandoned. Burke also sacrificed the potential for Aboriginal guides playing a major role.

On 19 October 1861, Burke took an advance party from Menindee and made a dash for Cooper Creek. Aided by favourable weather and recent rains, they arrived at Cooper Creek little more than three weeks later, on 11 November. William Wright, who had been recruited into the expedition at Kinchega on the Darling River, went with them accompanied by two Aboriginal guides as far as Torowoto, then the three of them turned back (Brahe, cited in Victoria 1861–62). It was intended that Wright would follow the advance party to Cooper Creek with more supplies and fresh camels (Wright,

cited in Victoria 1861–62). Before returning to Menindee, Wright instructed his guides to find Aboriginal people from inland groups to help the expedition reach Cooper Creek. Wright (cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 108) later claimed that:

*I told Mr Burke before I left him that I would procure guides to take him on to Cooper's Creek, which I did. I got the natives that were with me to get blacks to take him on as far as Bulloo. They left him there and he crossed to Cooper's Creek without any guides. Mr Burke had guides with him to Bulloo.*

Given the problems the advance party would eventually face in procuring food, it was unfortunate that Burke had reached Cooper Creek without the company of experienced Aboriginal guides from the Darling River area, who remained with Wright.

In the official investigations that followed the expedition, much is made of the apparent bad decisions made by Wright at the Menindee camp (Moorehead 1963). He was a crucial player in terms of supplying the depot at Cooper Creek and maintaining the connection with Melbourne. It was through Wright that the guides among the 'Darling blacks' were recruited, as he knew those Aboriginal people well having worked as a manager of Kinchega Station. One of the guides on this trip had previously been north with him and would play a major role in subsequent events (Wright, cited in Victoria 1861–62).

On 10 November 1860, trooper Myles Lyons and saddler Alexander McPherson set out from Menindee, accompanied by the Aboriginal tracker Dick, to convey urgent despatches from the Exploration Committee in Melbourne to Burke who had now reached Cooper Creek (Wright and Beckler, cited in Victoria 1861–62). The despatches included the most recent intelligence of Stuart's progress on his south–north crossing from Adelaide. When the messengers became lost and desperately short of provisions and water, Dick conveyed them to the care of local



Aboriginal people in the Torowoto district. He returned to Menindee, which he reached on 19 December, having had to walk for the last eight days as his horse was lame. Dick took Dr Hermann Beckler back to rescue the stranded men, who had lived for weeks on a small amount of nardoo flour per day. Beckler (cited in Spencer 1918, p. 13) recorded in his journal on 27 December that they had found:

*Macpherson [McPherson] at a short distance from us, apparently searching for something [nardoo] on the ground ... Lyons was at the camp engaged in baking cakes when we came up to him. The seeds of which they prepared a warn [sic: warm?] meal, and out of that either cakes or porridge, is not properly a seed, but the sporangium and the spores of a small plant, the leaves of which are very like clover. It is, I believe, a Marsilea [Marsilea], and everywhere to be met with where water stagnates for a time.*

The Europeans owed their lives to nardoo and the actions of Dick.

Back at Menindee, Dr Ludwig Becker commemorated the heroism displayed by the Aboriginal guide in a portrait of 'Dick, the brave and gallant native guide'. In correspondence dated 31 December 1861 from the Exploration Committee to Wright, John Macadam (cited in Wills 1863, p. 140) wrote that 'The medal for Dick, the aboriginal guide, bearing a suitable inscription, is forwarded with this despatch, and the committee leave in your hands the bestowal of such additional reward as you may deem proper – not exceeding five guineas (say 5£ 5s.)'. Wright did not leave Menindee to travel to the Cooper Creek depot until 26 January 1861; on that trip Dick accompanied the party, possibly through coercion. By 28 January they had reached Pamamaroo Lake, where Wright (cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 188) claimed that 'After breakfast Dick, the native, who had shown on several occasions a disposition to slip away, borrowed a clean shirt and then bolted. His unwillingness to accompany the party arose from his fear of

the natives, and was to be regretted, as his absence deprived us of our only interpreter.' Wright appeared to have mixed feelings about Dick's worthiness as a guide.

With the public focus on the poor decision-making processes involved with the running of the expedition, along with the suitability or not of nardoo as a food source, the investigation of the roles the Aboriginal people played have been largely ignored until recently. Little has been recorded about Dick or any other Indigenous men employed during the Burke and Wills saga. It is likely that Dick first became familiar with Europeans, such as Wright, at pastoral stations along the Darling River, which was then at the frontier of European expansion towards the north. Dick's cultural affiliations were probably with the Barkindji people who lived along the banks of the Darling River and ranging south. These people had good relations with those who lived in the back country, north and west of the river (Newland 1889).

Burke's small party was successful on the stage from Cooper Creek to the Gulf of Carpentaria, due to their chosen route and the weather. They benefited from local people's foraging activities. On one occasion in February 1861, faced with having to travel through a bog, they came across an Aboriginal pathway which took them to a 'nice watercourse', past some 'little pebbly rises where the blacks had been camping' and to a place where Aboriginal diggers had left behind a quantity of 'yams' that were 'so numerous that they could afford to leave lots of them about, probably having only selected the very best. We were not so particular, but ate many of those that they had rejected, and found them very good' (Wills 1863, p. 212; Wills, cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 229). Although not named, the roots were probably pencil yams (small yams) which are recorded as a major food source across arid Australia (Bindon 1996; Clarke 2007; Latz 1995), often found growing near creeks and lagoons (see Figure 4.6). The trip south to Cooper Creek



*Figure 4.6:* Pencil yams are generally collected after the surface parts of the plants die off, some months after rain. The tubers are cooked in hot sand and ashes. Philip A. Clarke, Tennant Creek, Northern Territory, 2011.

during late summer was more strenuous than the trip north and, with food supplies running short, the explorers looked for wild sources. On 21 April, Wills (1863, p. 235; cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 238) wrote in his journal: 'I am inclined to think that but for the abundance of portulac that we obtained on the journey, we should scarcely have returned to Cooper Creek.'<sup>7</sup> Many other explorers had found this plant useful in treating the debilitating and life-threatening condition of 'land scurvy', also known as 'Barcoo rot' (Earl and McCleary 1994; Hagger 1979; Ramson 1988).

Having reached the Cooper Creek depot, the surviving three explorers (Burke, Wills and King) decided that their return to settled districts would follow explorer Augustus C. Gregory's 1858 path, which was to cross the Strzelecki Desert to Mount Hopeless north of Lake Frome where there was a police station, then head south towards Adelaide. On 23 April the three men commenced travelling downstream along the southern bank of Cooper Creek (Burke, cited in Jackson 1862; Wills 1863). The chosen path was one that would have often been used by Aboriginal people on ochre expeditions, although they would have gone only during favourable seasons after good rains. On 24 April, Wills recorded that 'As we were about to start this morning, some blacks came by, from whom we were fortunate enough to get about twelve pounds [5.4 kg] of fish for a few pieces of straps and some matches, &c.' (Wills 1863, p. 273). The Aboriginal interest in acquiring exotic materials is consistent with their trading practices, with visitors to their country expected to pay for the right to pass through unmolested.

When the explorers' attempt to reach Mount Hopeless failed through lack of water, they backtracked towards the main depot at Cooper Creek, near the South Australian border with Queensland. On 6 May, Wills remarked in his journal that 'I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months' (Wills 1863, p. 282). He was

right, as the next day he and Burke started moving along the creek and found a group of Aboriginal people fishing. Wills (1863, p. 283) recorded that:

*... they gave us some half-a-dozen fish each, for luncheon, and intimated that if we would go to their camp we should have some more and some bread. I tore in two a piece of macintosh stuff that I had, and Mr. Burke gave one piece and I the other ... They had caught a considerable quantity of fish, but most of them were small. I noticed three different kinds; a small one that they call Cupi, from five to six inches [13–15 cm] long, and not broader than an eel; the common one, with large coarse scales, termed Peru; and a delicious fish, some of which run from a pound to two pounds [0.9 kg] weight; the natives call them Cawilchi. On our arrival at the camp they led us to a spot to camp on, and soon afterwards brought a lot of fish, and a kind of bread which they call nardoo ... In the evening various members of the tribe came down with lumps of nardoo and handfuls of fish, until we were positively unable to eat any more. They also gave us some stuff they call bedgery or pedgery [= pituri]; it has a highly intoxicating effect when chewed even in small quantities. It appears to be the dried stems and leaves of some shrub [see Figure 4.7].<sup>8</sup>*

Incredibly, given their dire circumstances, Burke was for a long while reluctant to accept help from Aboriginal people and on one occasion even angrily refused a gift of fish, ordering King to fire his revolver (King, cited in Victoria 1861–62; Wills 1863).

The explorers feasted well on the prepared nardoo given to them by local Aboriginal people, but had no knowledge of its early preparation stages and for some time did not know from which plant it came. After leaving the company of Aboriginal people, the explorers searched in vain for it in the surrounding vegetation. On 10 May, Wills described his despair: 'I went out to look





Figure 4.7: Pituri. Desert Aboriginal people used the foliage of this small tree to produce a powerful narcotic, as well as to poison game animals. Philip A. Clarke, Port Augusta, South Australia, 2007.

for the nardoo seed [sic. sporocarps] for making bread: in this I was unsuccessful, not being able to find a single tree of it in the neighbourhood of the camp. I, however, tried boiling the large kind of bean which the blacks call padlu; they boil easily, and when shelled are very sweet, much resembling in taste the French chestnut; they are to be found in large quantities nearly everywhere' (Wills 1863, p. 285). The identity of 'padlu' as a food plant is a mystery. Based on linguistic evidence, Wills may have been referring to the pop saltbush, a common low-growing shrub of inland Australia.<sup>9</sup> The description also fits a species of *Acacia*.

After much searching, on 17 May the explorers, perhaps unfortunately, located the source of the nardoo. While walking along an Aboriginal path 'King caught sight in the flat

of some nardoo seeds, and we soon found that the flat was covered with them. This discovery caused somewhat of a revolution in our feelings, for we considered that with the knowledge of this plant we were in a position to support ourselves, even if we were destined to remain on the creek and wait for assistance from town' (Wills 1863, pp. 286–287).

From this point, they relied heavily on the nardoo they collected, using a 'pounding stone' taken from a deserted Aboriginal shelter to process what they gathered (King, cited in Victoria 1861–62; Wills 1863). Wills (1863, p. 288) noted on 24 May that he had 'Started with King to celebrate the Queen's birthday by fetching from Nardoo Creek what is now to us the staff of life; returned at a little after two P.M. with a fair supply, but find the collecting of the seed a slower and more troublesome process than could be desired'. In his journal for June 1861, Wills frequently referred to himself and his companions 'pounding' nardoo. Among Wills' ailments was severe 'constipation of the bowels' (Wills 1863, p. 289). By 15 June, Wills wondered whether his condition would improve if he consumed less nardoo and chewed tobacco to suppress his appetite. From this time until Wills' last journal entry, the surviving explorers gathered and ate nardoo, which did not assist them to regain their health and well-being. This seemed inexplicable as, at this time, local Aboriginal groups appeared to live well on a diet comprised largely of nardoo and fish.

The health of the three explorers, already poor following the exertion involved in getting to the Gulf and back, continued to deteriorate at Cooper Creek. By late June, Wills was no longer able to move and Burke was not much better off. On 29 June, Wills (1863, p. 302) was close to death and noted in his journal that 'starvation on nardoo is by no means very unpleasant, but for the weakness one feels, for as far as appetite is concerned, it gives me the greatest satisfaction'. After Burke and Wills had died,

King (cited in Victoria 1861–62) was left to fend for himself. On one occasion, he was lucky to find a store of nardoo in a deserted shelter, which fed him for a fortnight. In arid regions, Aboriginal people often kept a surplus of dried food, such as nardoo and seed, stored in wooden containers or in bags of skin or woven string, for future use (Clarke 2003, 2007). These were cached in brush shelters or dry caves or buried in the sand.

It is clear from Wills' journal, found with his body, that for the most part the Victorian Exploring Expedition had only limited interaction with Aboriginal people. Sole survivor King (cited in Victoria 1861–62) eventually made the wise decision to join a local band of Aboriginal people. Each day women gave him nardoo, presumably prepared for eating, while the men sometimes provided him with fish. In return, King would shoot birds for them. In line with Aboriginal custom, as a single man King slept in the bough shelter of unmarried men each night. On one occasion, he noticed that a woman who had just given him a ball of prepared nardoo had a sore arm, preventing her from grinding any more. He treated her by cleaning the wound with a sponge soaked in water he had boiled, then applying silver nitrate. The effect must have been rapid and positive, as from then on this woman and her husband maintained a close relationship with the explorer, which included helping him make camp whenever the group moved to a new location.

King spent weeks travelling with his adopted band until the arrival of Howitt's relief expedition at Cooper Creek (Howitt and Foster, cited in Victoria 1861–62). Howitt proved an excellent choice of leader, as he was an experienced bushman, an accomplished geologist and an emerging ethnographer and anthropologist (Moorehead 1963; Murgatroyd 2002; Stanner 1972). Probably due to his bush skills and the presence of Aboriginal guides Sandy and Frank, the 12 men in his party appear to have largely avoided the health problems suffered

by Burke's expedition at Cooper Creek. Howitt made sure that succulent vegetables, such as mesembryanthemum (pigface) (see Figure 4.8), portulac and wild spinach were frequently eaten (Howitt, cited in Victoria 1861–62).<sup>10</sup> Importantly, his party travelled during a mild season. The relief expedition found King on 15 September 1861 in such a state that he was not at first recognised as being European. King was able to return to Melbourne but he developed peripheral neuropathy, due to the prolonged deficiency of thiamine (Earl and McCleary 1994; Moorehead 1963). He never fully regained his health, dying in 1872 at the relatively young age of 33.

## Conclusion

The tragedy of the Burke and Wills expedition highlights the importance of the proper transfer of landscape-based knowledge from the Indigenous occupants to the European newcomers. If the explorers had gained greater intelligence of local plant foods and their preparation, they may have avoided sickness altogether. A greater appreciation of the climate cycles of the interior may have tempered Burke's decision to make such a risky crossing. As demonstrated by the events surrounding the rescue of McPherson and Lyons at Torowoto, the presence of Aboriginal guides with an understanding of regional languages would have facilitated the communication of ecological knowledge to the stranded explorers at Cooper Creek. If Burke, Wills, Gray and King had the services of an experienced Aboriginal guide, such as Dick, in Central Australia the chances of them all surviving would have significantly increased. For the explorers, a closer relationship with local Aboriginal bands could have led to better prediction of the local climate and the possible use of bush medicines to improve their well-being.

From the late 19th century, scientists working in remote parts of Australia recognised the value of Aboriginal ecological knowledge. Biologists on the Horn





Figure 4.8: *Sarcocolla*, an inland species of pigface. In 1861, the members of the Burke and Wills relief expedition, led by Alfred W. Howitt, ate the leaves of a pigface species to avoid scurvy. Philip A. Clarke, Port Augusta, South Australia, 2009.

Expedition, which travelled through Central Australia in 1894, employed local Aboriginal people as collectors and recorded valuable biological data from them (Baker and Nesbitt 1996; Clarke 2008). In the 20th century, Donald Thomson drew even more heavily upon Aboriginal ecological knowledge in his zoological work on the mammals and fishes of northern Australia (Thomson 1987). From the late 20th century, researchers have studied Indigenous ecological knowledge in its own right (Horstman and Wightman 2001; Lucas *et. al.* 1997; Rose 2005; Walsh 1990; White and Meehan 1993). While the great depth of Aboriginal-held information on the environment is widely recognised today by Western-style researchers, its continuation as an oral tradition is threatened by social changes within the Aboriginal community, with generations of senior custodians who have direct hunting and gathering experience

passing away (Clarke 2007). Apart from this threat, modifications to the physical environment, brought on by altered fire regimes, invasion of exotic species and climate change, are changing the context for this knowledge.

## Endnotes

- 1 For cultural boundaries of these groups refer to Tindale (1974). For the Diyari language, Reuther (1981) provided a vocabulary and Austin (1981) produced a grammar. Jones (1990) gave a demographic history of the Cooper Creek area. Note that in the literature Yandruwandha is sometimes written as 'Yantruwanta', 'Jandruwanta' or 'Yantruwunta' and Diyari as 'Dieri'.
- 2 Overview also based on the range of objects the author inspected in the

- Aboriginal collection of the South Australian Museum.
- 3 The archaeological collection of the South Australian Museum has many examples of grindstones and pounders from the Cooper Creek district.
  - 4 There are two species: common nardoo (*Marsilea drummondii*) and short-fruited nardoo (*Marsilea hirsuta*).
  - 5 Kimber (1984) presented an overview of other Nardoo Dreaming accounts from surrounding areas. McBryde (1987) provided a Grinding Stone Dreaming from Wangkangurru people further west.
  - 6 The batwing coral tree (*Erythrina vesperilio*) is also known as the Stuart beantree and grey corkwood. There are examples of these shields in the Aboriginal ethnographic collection of the South Australian Museum.
  - 7 See King and Wills (cited in Victoria 1861–62) for other references to the use of portulac.
  - 8 The fish species Wills observed may have been the spangled perch or catfish (cupi), bony bream (peru) and callop (cawichi).
  - 9 The ‘padlu’ that Wills heard may have been the *paldru* that missionary Johann Reuther (cited in Clarke 2008) listed in the early 20th century as a Diyari word for ‘shrub, pods burst open, pop-saltbush’.
  - 10 Based on my field knowledge of the inland flora, the ‘mesembryanthemum’ is probably sarcozona (*Sarcozona praecox*), while the ‘portulac’ would be munyeroo (*Portulaca oleracea*). The ‘wild spinach’ is possibly either *Chenopodium auricomum* or a species of *Tetragonia*, all of which are sometimes known as ‘native spinach’ or ‘wild spinach’.
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# The Aboriginal contribution to the expedition, observed through Germanic eyes

*David Dodd*

## Introduction

In a recent publication, Allen (2011) attempted to address the role that the Aboriginal people played during the Victorian Exploring Expedition and the subsequent relief parties. He noted 'there was little organised knowledge about Aboriginal people with most information coming from Sturt and Mitchell', and added, 'Most fields of science practised in Australia during the middle of the nineteenth century were undeveloped, largely involving the observation and classification of Australian nature' (Allen 2011, p. 145).

This chapter attempts to examine the story of the expedition from the point of view of the contributions made by the Aboriginal peoples who came into contact with it, contributions which could have meant different outcomes for both parties.

All these are measured against a series of encounters – some positive (provision of guides, provision of food, general help etc.) and some difficult (skirmishes at Bulloo, problems at the Dig tree site etc.). It will do this from the perspectives of the four German participants in the expedition: Beckler, Becker, Brahe and Neumayer. Dr Hermann Beckler, medical doctor and botanist and Dr Ludwig Becker, artist and naturalist and geographer, both left reports, written accounts, drawings, journals and various publications. The reports and evidence given to the Victorian government's Committee of Enquiry by William Brahe, who became an appointed officer to command the depot camp at Cooper Creek, have been used to examine the interactions and events with the local Aboriginal people during the depot party's five-month stay at Cooper Creek. The reports of Professor George Neumayer,

director of the Flagstaff Observatory, on his brief travels with the expedition from Swan Hill to Bilbarka (present-day Pooncarie) during September–October 1860 have also been consulted.

Beckler and Becker were the only members who made systematic written records of their involvement and observations during their participation in the expedition and, while both made sketches of various aspects and landscapes of their journeys, it was Becker's artistry which captured the most endearing Aboriginal elements of the expedition. As Allen remarked, while members of the expedition and the relief parties made observations of the Indigenous populations, it was 'Hermann Beckler and Ludwig Becker (who) provided a deeper appreciation of Aboriginal culture than the majority of the other explorers' (Allen 2011, p. 266).

Beckler also provided sketches which illustrated the reports he submitted to the Royal Society, and made a further 35 pencil sketches with which he planned to illustrate his proposed publication for German readers, entitled '*Burkes Entdeckungsreise, Eine Reise nach Zentral-Australien*'.<sup>1</sup> Through the publication of Marjorie Tipping's (1979) book on Ludwig Becker, Beckler's manuscript became known in Australia and was subsequently translated and edited by Stephen Jeffries and Michael Kertesz, as *A Journey to Cooper's Creek*, in 1993 (Beckler 1993).

## Dr Hermann Beckler

Hermann Beckler was a prolific diarist. Throughout his stay in Australia he gathered material for articles for German readers and maintained a regular correspondence with his Brother Karl (Charles) in Germany, which provides a remarkable personal insight to his six-year sojourn in Australia. This correspondence has been published in an edited form by Johannes Voigt (2000) as *Hermann Beckler: Entdeckungen in Australien: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen eines Deutschen 1855–1862*.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, Beckler's correspondence, manuscripts and drawings have survived and are in the Heimatmuseum Archives in Hoechstädt un.der. Donau, in Bavaria, the town of his birth in 1828. The Beckler archival holdings were examined during a visit in 2011 and during 2012 arrangements were made to digitise the complete set of 35 drawings and other relevant material for ultimate inclusion in the Royal Society of Victoria's Burke and Wills Expedition Collection held at the State Library of Victoria.

## Dr Ludwig Becker

Ludwig Becker was an accomplished illustrator and writer and, as the only member of the Royal Society to take part in the expedition, his legacy provided a remarkable set of official drawings, illustrations, sketches, maps and watercolours, a Corroboree song, and letters and reports associated with the progress of the expedition to Menindee and thereafter with the supply party until his untimely death at Bulloo on 29 April 1861. This comprehensive record of the expedition was chronicled by Marjorie Tipping (1979) and has been used as a primary resource in this chapter.

## Professor Georg Neumayer

Professor Georg Neumayer, as director of the Flagstaff Observatory, was a councillor of the Royal Society and a member of the Society's Exploration Committee. He was the only member of that committee to experience and understand the hardships that faced the expedition, particularly the scientific members, after it crossed the Murray. He travelled throughout the length and breadth of Victoria during 1858–63, during which he undertook a series of comprehensive magnetic observations which he published after his return to Germany in 1869 (Neumayer 1869). This publication provided a unique description of the Victorian rural environment including Indigenous peoples

whom Neumayer met during his many trips and his experiences during his journey from Swan Hill to Bilbarka: Trip no. III has been used as a primary reference in this chapter (Neumayer 1869, pp. 13–25).

## The expedition as a Humboldtian exercise

While the establishment of the Royal Society's Victorian Exploring Expedition (later known as the Burke and Wills Expedition), led by Robert O'Hara Burke, was born out of many motives, including economic and political imperatives, its essential ingredient was its scientific mission (McCann and Joyce 2011, pp. 1–21).

Some members of the Exploration Committee, which included the government botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller, and Neumayer, drew up the set of scientific 'Instructions' for the expedition and arranged the appointment of the three scientists, William John Wills and the two Germans, Dr Hermann Beckler and Dr Ludwig Becker.

Mueller, Neumayer, Beckler and Becker were part of the vanguard of 19th-century German explorers/scientists/collectors who were drawn to the Australian colonies, largely through the influence of Alexander von Humboldt, the pioneer of the science of global exploration and discovery of the New World (McCann and Joyce 2011, pp. 10–11).

Humboldt (1769–1859) was an eminent German scientist and explorer who greatly influenced scientific thought and discovery in Germany during the early 19th century with his integrated scientific approach to discoveries of flora and fauna of the New World, supported by proper measurements of all manner of physical variables to establish a relationship or connectivity between all facets of the environment.

Mueller, Neumayer and a number of other German scientists, notably Ludwig Leichhardt who had carried out explorations of Australia in the 1840s, were all scientists in the Humboldtian tradition. Neumayer had even visited Humboldt on a trip to

Germany in 1859 to seek funds to support the establishment of his observatory on Flagstaff Hill in Melbourne. The Humboldtian approach to the meticulous observation, measurement and recording of the natural environment was built in to the expedition's Instructions, put together largely by Mueller and Neumayer as followers of Humboldt.

## Disciples of Humboldt

Herde (2004, p. 14) identified that 'Beckler's Romantic quest for adventure and discovery (in Australia) marked him as a Humboldtian disciple.' Indeed Beckler, on his arrival in Australia in 1856, carried a letter of introduction from Humboldt (Voigt 2000, p. 52). Ludwig Becker was also regarded as a Humboldtian disciple and so the stage was set for these two German scientists who would carefully observe and skilfully record the aspects and phenomena of the natural environment through which the expedition travelled, examining relationships; for example, between plant communities, climate, soils etc. and the scientific order of nature.

The formal set of Instructions from the Exploration Committee, dated and signed by the secretary of the committee, Dr John Macadam, on 3 September 1860, was finally received by Burke and delivered to Wills, Beckler and Becker as the party neared Swan Hill, on or about 6 September some three weeks after the departure from Melbourne. This late delivery was to become symptomatic of the manner in which the expedition was put together and about to be managed by Burke, particularly his reaction to the scientific requirements and his treatment of the scientists Beckler and Becker. Fortunately, both Beckler and Becker had commenced their scientific work almost as soon as the expedition had reached central Victoria, with Beckler botanising and Becker drawing. The Instructions were therefore merely an *aide mémoire* to their scientific investigative training.

Anthropological and ethnological research into Indigenous peoples did not feature



prominently in the expedition's scientific remit. Perhaps the colonisation of Victoria, coupled with the impact of the gold rush which had dispossessed the Aboriginal tribes in Victoria and consigned them to the status of 'non-people', meant that there was no real reason to be interested in the tribes north of the Murray, as Indigenous peoples were just to be regarded as part of the landscape.

Surprisingly, in his Presidential Address to the members of the Royal Society on 8 April 1861, Governor Barkly lamented, when referring to a paper on the manners and customs of Aborigines in the Port Lincoln district that had been recently read to the society, that Victorian Aborigines were disappearing and that efforts should be made to research their dialects and traditions (see Appendix 5.1). The Governor made further references to the expedition and the lack of communication on its progress and whereabouts, but little did they realise that within the next 21 days four members of the expedition would be dead – Charles Gray on 17 April, Charles Stone on 22 April, William Purcell on 23 April and Ludwig Becker, the only formal member of the Royal Society, on 29 April 1861. The Aboriginal man known as Mr Shirt, as a result of the skirmish at Bulloo, died on 27 April 1861.

William Blandowski's celebrated expedition to the Murray River in 1856–57<sup>3</sup> should have alerted the Exploration Committee to the vibrant Aboriginal communities along the Murray in the north-west of Victoria and the south-western area of New South Wales (Allen 2009, pp. 129–145). These communities were about to have their traditional ways of life changed forever, through a steady procession of pastoralist-explorers seeking new grazing lands, intruding on their territories and interacting to the detriment of these communities. It would be these peoples of the Murray-Darling who would provide guides, ambassadors or go-betweens to the expedition and who would literally come to the rescue of what had become a fragmented expedition.

It was therefore not surprising that the Instructions did not identify, in more definite references, the need to provide observations of the Indigenous peoples who would be met once the expedition had crossed the Murray and travelled into the unsettled districts. The Instructions did, however, contain some oblique ethnographical references, first with respect to Hermann Beckler, requesting that 'It would be of vast importance to ascertain, as extensively as possible what relation the vegetation of the country bears to its geological formation.' 'Of plants which may prove of utility for food or otherwise or which are drawn into use by the natives, more particularly.' Beckler left not only a series of written records of his participation in the ill-fated expedition, but also a botanical record of collected plants, botanical drawings and pencil drawings and sketches of various expedition events and landscapes.

Artist Ludwig Becker fared a little better with his Instructions, that requested 'that he provide sketches of the relevant geological features and also of all objects of natural history and natives (aborigines)'. Becker provided a valuable record of the expedition through his 80-odd paintings and sketches, with at least nine paintings and sketches showing individual portraits and family and camp groups of Aboriginal people from the various tribes encountered along the route as far as Bulloo.

## The German scientists: empathy towards Indigenous peoples

Before attempting to examine and consider how two disparate parties could have or should have interacted in such socially environmentally difficult circumstances, it is important to consider the pre-conditioning, attitudes, empathy and experiences of the German scientists towards Indigenous peoples before joining the expedition.

### *Dr Hermann Beckler (1828–1914)*

Dr Hermann Beckler was born in Hoechstädt un. der. Donau in Swabia, north-west of Munich in 1828. After graduating in medicine from the University of Munich in 1855 he emigrated to Moreton Bay (then the state of New South Wales) in 1856, where he tried to practise as a doctor then as a pharmacist but was unsuccessful (Jeffries, cited in Beckler 1993, pp. xix–xx). His real interests lay in botany and plant collections and the natural sciences, in the best Humboldtian tradition, and he eventually travelled overland to Melbourne via Deniliquin where, as a member of a team of drovers, he delivered a large mob of sheep brought down from the Darling Downs. In Melbourne he worked for Baron von Mueller cataloguing plant specimens. As the medical doctor and botanist on the expedition and as a scientist he immediately ran foul of Burke who, in his haste to cross the continent, decided after they had crossed the Murray that scientific work should cease and that the scientists should become labourers. Burke's lack of interest in pursuing the scientific aspirations of the expedition dismayed Hermann Beckler and Ludwig Becker. Thankfully, Burke's decision to split the expedition at Menindee enabled both Beckler and Becker to resume their scientific work unhindered.

Since arriving in Australia, Beckler had become fascinated with Aboriginal culture and society and his descriptions of Aboriginal culture during his time in Queensland provided some remarkable insights and recordings of Indigenous activities. Prior to his arrival in Melbourne, Beckler attended a great corroboree on the Darling Downs during the evening of 25 March 1858. He described in graphic detail every aspect of the event, which involved 100 men dancing and 200–250 women and children in attendance. He wrote excitedly to his brother Karl about the event (Voigt 2000, pp. 144–146) and his description later appeared in the German magazine *Globus* in 1867 as 'Corroberri Ein Beitrag zur Kenntniss

der Musik bei den Australian Ureinwohnern' (Corroboree: a contribution to knowledge of the music of the Australian Aborigines: Beckler 1867). A full English translation of Beckler's article is included in this chapter as Appendix 5.2. He expressed excitement at witnessing such a spectacle and returned to the area the following day to observe the aftermath. He went on to describe the musicality of the corroboree: 'Three strokes of the boomerang lead to the beginning of a flurry of strokes. The rhythm is of the most utmost severity, the intonation unique in its purity, the singing of the octaves by the women and children are a delight, as they are the best of the rarely heard European chorus' (Beckler 1867, pp. 82–84). Beckler recorded the music of three other corroborees, including ones which he witnessed at locations in the Darling and Upper Darling and at Gynadah (Beckler 1867, p. 84).

After the collapse of the expedition Beckler returned to Melbourne in mid September 1861 and immediately joined Neumayer in his magnetic survey of Victoria's Western District and the Lower Murray (Neumayer 1869, p. 26). At Wellington on 16 December 1861, Beckler received a telegram requesting his attendance at the Royal Commission in Melbourne. He left immediately, returning via Adelaide to be present at the commission's last hearing on 30 December 1861 (Neumayer 1869, p. 45). He left for Germany in January 1862 and later practised as a country doctor in Bad Hindelang, in the Bavarian Allgau, before retiring to Fischen in the mountains where he died on 10 December 1914 (Voigt 2000, p. 17).

### *Dr Ludwig Becker (1808–1861)*

Dr Ludwig Becker, variously described as an artist, explorer and naturalist, was born of a notable family at Offenbach-am-Main, near Darmstadt, Germany on 5 September 1808. In 1828 he was engaged at Frankfurt on Main in lithographic work. As a result of the 1848 revolutions in the German states he moved to Edinburgh, where in July 1850

he accepted an invitation to emigrate with William Gardner and family, a successful merchant with property in Tasmania, arriving in Launceston on 10 March 1851. His interest in the natural sciences enabled him, under the patronage of Governor Dennison, to paint a number of Tasmanian natural features and miniatures (Meidl 2004, pp. 77–79, 101–108). His interest in the plight of Tasmanian Aborigines led him to paint portraits of six members of the Tasmanian tribes (Meidl 2004, p. 91).

The gold rushes attracted him to Victoria and he pursued gold digging in Bendigo in 1852–54. Becker made meteorological observations and produced enough sketches for an exhibition in Melbourne in April 1854. He became a member of the Council of Victorian Society of Fine Arts in 1856 and in 1859 he joined the Philosophical Institute of Victoria, which became the Royal Society of Victoria, to which he contributed many scientific papers, ranging from such topics as meteorological observations taken on the Bendigo goldfields, to the natural history of leeches, bats and lyrebirds and even zinc found in basalt.

Perhaps his most significant presentation occurred at the Ordinary Meeting of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria on 8 September 1858, where he exhibited and described some specimens of interest in natural history and the ethnology of Australia, as the minutes of the meeting record:

*The remarks of Dr Becker were illustrated by several aboriginal skulls, shell necklaces, tomahawks and other native weapons, belonging to the true Australian race, the aborigines of Tasmania, New Zealand, New Guinea, and the Feegee Islands. Dr. Becker referred principally to the peculiarities of and probable relations subsisting between the aborigines of Tasmania and the Papua or New Guinea man; to the higher state of civilization the New Zealanders already were found to possess, when first discovered; and that*

*our own aborigines, in Australia, are of a much higher class than as usually and wrongly stated in works treating of the same subject (Becker 1858, p. xxi).*

Becker's ethnological and anthropological knowledge and artistic ability were invaluable qualifications for his selection as a member of the Victorian Exploring Expedition. He was one of its most enthusiastic members and carried out his duties as outlined in the Instructions to the letter. He sent his first despatches from Swan Hill and from Menindee sent a number of specimens, drawings, watercolour sketches and diaries, with accompanying reports, but soon became dispirited when they were not even acknowledged by the Exploration Committee in Melbourne (Tipping 1979, p. 191). His numerous watercolour sketches, drawings and maps are a lasting legacy of the expedition, particularly his paintings and sketches of the Indigenous peoples he met. Ultimately Becker's exhaustive commitment to his duties led to his illness through the debilitating effects of scurvy, and he died at Bulloo south of Cooper Creek on 29 April 1861.

### *Professor Georg von Neumayer (1826–1909)*

Georg Balthasar von Neumayer, variously described as a scientist, oceanographer and meteorologist, was born in 1826 in Kircheimbolanden, Bavarian Palatinate. Devoted to science, he studied at Munich University, where he completed his doctorate in 1849. He specialised thereafter as a magnetician, hydrographer, oceanographer and meteorologist and, as a disciple of the great American oceanographer M.F. Maury, he systematically plotted the logs of ships sailing from Europe to Australia providing them with sailing directions that would give the quickest sailing time – the concept of the Great Circle route which Maury had pioneered (see *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Victoria* **123**(1), 5–6, 132–133).

Neumayer first visited Australia in 1852–54 as a seaman and then as a digger on the Bendigo goldfields. Recognising that Australia provided opportunities for scientific research, he returned to Germany determined to enlist support for organised work in his chosen subjects. Supported by the scientist and geographer Alexander von Humboldt, Neumayer enlisted the interest and support of King Maximilian in his plan to set up a physical observatory in Melbourne to study terrestrial magnetic and related phenomena. He arrived back in Melbourne in January 1857 to establish an observatory on Flagstaff Hill, using the existing signal station buildings. William John Wills was employed as an assistant there, and it was Neumayer who recommended Wills for appointment to the Victorian Exploring Expedition. One of Neumayer's most spectacular achievements was the completion of a thorough magnetic survey of Victoria, carried out almost single-handedly in 1858–64, travelling some 11 000 miles (17 700 km) on foot or packhorse and setting up 235 magnetic stations from sea level to an altitude of 7200 feet (2195 m) on Mt Kosciusko. Neumayer's record of his survey is laced in true Humboldtian observational style with observations of the natural environment, including the Indigenous people whom he met throughout Victoria (Neumayer 1869).

During part of this extensive magnetic survey Neumayer joined Burke's expedition at Swan Hill and travelled with the party to Pooncarie, during which time he carried out magnetic observations with Wills. 'Burke and Wills had been very anxious that I should accompany them some 200 or 300 miles, in order to assist in the organisation of systematic observations in the various branches of physical science and astronomy; and as this feeling was shared by the Exploration Committee and the Government, I made arrangements for leaving town at the earliest moment with the intention of joining the Expedition at Swan Hill' (Neumayer 1869, p. 10). Wills had been expected to carry out

magnetic observations during the journey northward but it had become obvious that this would not be possible because of Burke's attitude towards scientific work and the overpowering navigational and management workload that he placed upon Wills. Neumayer returned to Melbourne with Wills' instruments.

Neumayer was a dedicated scientist who entered fully into the scientific life of the colony, to such an extent that he was elected a councillor of the Royal Society of Victoria in 1859, vice-president in 1860 and a life member in 1864. Neumayer returned to Germany in 1864 and, after a distinguished career, became the director of the Deutsche Seewarte (German Marine Observatory). He died at Neustadt/Weinstrasse, Germany, on 24 May 1909.

### *William Brahe (1835–1912)*

The fourth German on the expedition, William Brahe, was not a scientist but his appointment by Burke to command the depot at Cooper Creek brought him into almost daily contact with the Aborigines who frequented the depot throughout the party's prolonged stay there.

Brahe was born in Paderborn, Germany in 1835 and came to Victoria in 1852 to work on the goldfields. He was an experienced handler of cattle, horses and wagons, an ideal person to be employed as a member of the expedition. He had previously observed Indigenous people in the Port Fairy district of Victoria; none of the other depot party members (McDonough, Patten and Dost Mahomet) had similar experience, apart from the Aborigines they had met during the expedition.

Burke's Gulf party departed on 16 December 1860 and Brahe and his three-man team maintained a vigil for their return for over four months, finally giving up hope and leaving the campsite on the morning of that fateful day, 21 April 1861, when Burke's exhausted party returned – to a deserted campsite – that evening.

On his arrival in Melbourne with Howitt on Sunday 30 June 1861, Brahe, at the immediate request of the Exploration Committee, delivered a report on the events which took place at the Dig tree depot after the departure of Burke's party until the depot party's departure from the Dig tree on 21 April 1861. This report, dated 30 June 1861, was based on Brahe's Dig tree diary and, together with the record of his appearance before the commission, provides a record of the depot party's interaction with the Indigenous people on the Cooper.

In Melbourne Brahe found himself at the centre of a furious controversy. Had he abandoned the camp contrary to Burke's instructions? In fact, Burke had failed to document his instructions to Brahe, and these conflicting accounts were never really reconciled. The Royal Commission of Inquiry found that while Brahe's decision to leave the depot 'may be deserving of considerable censure', the committee accepted that 'His decision was most unfortunate, but we believe that he acted from a conscientious desire to discharge his duty'. Brahe was in effect exonerated by the commission. He died in Melbourne on 16 September 1912.

## Aboriginal interactions with the expedition

The following is a chronology of particular events during which Aboriginal tribes along the expedition track interacted with the various parties – Burke's advance party, Brahe's depot party and Wright's supply party – as well as Beckler's rescue of trooper Lyons and MacPherson. The Aboriginal interactions with the advance party have limited records, unlike those made by Hermann Beckler and Ludwig Becker during the supply party's journey through the Channel Country, in the south-western corner of New South Wales to just short of the Queensland border (near present-day Noccundra). Becker's and Beckler's careful diaries, notes, sketches and narratives provide a substantive basis on which to examine the contribution of

Aboriginal tribes to the operation and management of the supply party's ill-fated and largely wasted attempt to support and follow Burke's expedition to Cooper Creek.

### *From Swan Hill to the Darling via Balranald*

Despite receiving detailed directions, after leaving Swan Hill for Balranald on 12 September 1860 the Victorian Exploring Expedition took the wrong track after crossing the Murray. While setting up camp for the night it had its first encounter with Aboriginal peoples (probably the Mathi-Mathi people) at Spewah at their camp on a backwater of the Murray (see Figure 5.1).

In Becker's second report he described the scene:

*A native camp full of Blacks was near the spot where we commence pitching our tents. The natives did not deem it prudent to remain so close to us and notwithstanding our assuring them that they had nothing to fear, they moved their children and chattels a hundred yards away and contrary to their custom, here they lay silent and concealed during the night, not even attracted by the produce of our cooks skill. I made a sketch of the native camp and the scenery around it, as shown in drawing No 6 (Tipping 1979, p. 196).*

Beckler recorded the campsite scene slightly differently:

*We did not regret this (for taking the wrong turn) for we reached a magnificent camping place on a wide, lake-like backwater of the Murray in the evening ... Several large eucalypts stood at the edge of the water. At a little distance a gigantic gum tree (Eucalyptus) stood in the water and its reflection in the water was the strangest sight I have ever seen of a single object reflected in the water. Mr Becker, our artist made a successful colour sketch of this strange sight. During the night the natives that we met here set*





Figure 5.1: 'Near our camp at Speewah, Sep. 12. 60'. Watercolour, pen and sepia ink. Ludwig Becker, in Ludwig Becker Sketchbook. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

*alight a large tree trunk and we had a radiantly illuminated night scene whose effect well outdid many forms of artificial lighting (Beckler 1993, p. 26).*

Neumayer joined the expedition at Swan Hill and travelled with it to Balranald and on to Bilbarka (Pooncarie) before returning to Melbourne via the Wimmera in December 1860, during which time he continued his magnetic survey observations. He joined the expedition at the Speewah campsite and remarked on the Aborigines:

*We came as far as a place called Spivoa (Speewah) close to a fine water-hole and large gum-trees and camped quite near a native camping place. The Blacks certainly were some of the finest and tallest I have yet seen of that race and the good condition, in which they apparently were, was probably to some extent owing to the kind treatment they received at the hands of Mr McKenzie of Poonboon and the settlers generally ...*

*I may here insert a few remarks respecting some customs of the native of this part of the country. Whenever one of their number dies a natural death, they firmly believe that his death is caused by another man and that this man has to be killed; and the only difficulty now consists in finding the malefactor. Early in the morning they go out to the burial place and seem under the belief that there they receive information as to the direction they must take in order to meet with him. The first they encounter is to be killed. They seem to have great affection for their relatives; and women have to carry their dead babies on their backs until another baby of their tribe dies. The Blacks between the Murrumbidgee and the Wakool are far stronger and finer men; even the Lubras are far better looking, than any I have seen in other parts of the country (Neumayer 1869, pp. 10–11, 15).*

### *From Balranald to the Darling: the first use of Aboriginal guides*

At Balranald, the expedition's membership was reduced by Burke and a range of stores were auctioned. The expedition party moved north-west using a circuitous route through the Mallee scrub country with low sandy hills and sparse water holes. Because of the slow pace, at Prungle (about a third of the way through the journey), Burke decided to divide his party. He took 10 expeditioners including Neumayer onwards to the Darling, leaving Beckler to supervise the following party which included Brahe as one of the wagon drivers along with Hodgkinson and the team of wagoners. The difficult terrain at times made passage of the heavy overladen wagons almost impossible .

Burke, aided by local Aboriginal guides (probably from the Yitha-Yitha people: Hercus 2011, p. 2), headed straight for the Darling, which he reached in four days after pushing through the dense Mallee scrub and saltbush country interspersed with sandy hills. This was hardly the type of route that would have been chosen by his Indigenous guides – they would have identified a route which would have followed generally the ground contours, used the available water holes and avoided the impenetrable Mallee scrub. One suspects that Burke's lack of bush skills and impatience overruled the Aboriginal guides. Burke realised that his route was unsuitable for heavy wagons and camels so he sent an Aboriginal messenger back to Beckler with instructions to take a different route, with Burke's party also returning to assist them.

On 19 September 1869, Beckler's wagon group camped at an outstation called Terickenkom. On the morning they were preparing to leave:

*Behind some bushes and looking at our doings several natives sat on the ground, among them was a couple of women whose faces were painted in such a manner as to give the head the appearance of a skull, when seen from*

*the distance; round the eyes was drawn with white paint, a circle, an inch broad and the hair on the woman tied up closely & covered with a piece of cloth, while the other lunar had her hair painted or rather smeared over with the same white colour, giving the head a still more skull-like appearance. I found that this mode of painting the faces is a habit met with as far as the Darling; it is a sign of mourning for relations and that women as well as men show in the same way their respect for the departed friends (Tipping 1979, p. 198).*

Tipping said that the women belonged to the Muthi Muthi tribe but Hercus stated that they were Yitha-Yitha people, as regional linguistic analysis showed that they were members of the Murray River language (Hercus 2011, p. 2) (see Figure 5.2).

Beckler recorded that his wagon group left Cole's water hole on 24 September:

*Marched at 7¼ am in a N.W. by N. direction. a young native, acting as a guide, sat on one of the wagons, while his uncle Whitepepper the 'old man' as he, par excellence, was called by all the natives of the district, walked in front of us with a fire-stick in one hand and a yam-stick in the other, as I have shown in sketch No 9. This 'old man' appeared to be of the age of 70; his hair is not white but has a peculiar pale greenish-yellow tint, and is beautifully curled by the hand of nature. I made a profile drawing of the head of this man who seemed to me to be a fair specimen of an old but hardy aboriginal of the district (Tipping 1979, p. 199) (see Figure 5.3).*

On 29 September the party left Aurompo. On the way Becker recorded, 'I spoke to an Aboriginal, whose face showed the usual white markings of mourning. He told me that the "big Emus with four legs" had camped last night at Gambana with plenty of water there. We reached this place at 5 p.m. – Soon after us, but from an opposite direction, Mr Burke arrived' (Tipping 1979, p. 200).



Figure 5.2: 'Women in mourning between Peika and Terekonom'. Sketches of Hermann Beckler, from the original German edition of *Burke's Expedition: A Journey to Central Australia*.



Figure 5.3: 'Watpiba, ein alter Eingeborener mit rauchenden Feuerstocke' (Watpiba, an old native with smoking fire stick). Sketches of Hermann Beckler, from the original German edition of *Burke's Expedition: A Journey to Central Australia*.

The party arrived at Bilbarka on 2 October and stayed for seven days, during which time the party seemed to be preoccupied with trying to round up straying camels. Becker recorded on 8 October that 'Mr Landells again went out for the lost animals & mounted for that purpose a camel taking behind him a "black-fellow". I think this was the first time that an Australian Aboriginal rode on a camel' (Tipping 1979, p. 203). Captain Johnston's river boat, *Moolgewanke*, fortuitously arrived on the scene on 9 October and undertook to transport about 8 tons of equipment and stores to Menindee.

### *Bilbarka to Menindee*

On 11 October the expedition left Bilbarka for Menindee with Burke's group, arriving on 15 October; the steamer and the camels arrived shortly afterwards, on 17 October. On Friday 19 October Burke's advance



party comprising Wills, Brahe, King, Gray, McDonough, Patten and Dost Mahomet left for Cooper Creek. The remaining members of the expedition (Beckler, Becker, Stone, Hodgkinson, Purcell, Smith and Belooch – the supply party), set up camp at the junction of the Pamamaroo Creek and the Darling, some 7 miles upstream from Menindee (see Figure 5.4).

### *With Burke's advance party to Cooper Creek*

Burke's advance party, guided by William Wright and two local Aboriginal boys, Dick (Mountain)<sup>4</sup> and an unnamed boy, experienced excellent travelling conditions to reach their first camp site on a branch of the Cooper (now known as the Wilson River) (Camp No. 57) on 11 November 1860. They made a total of eight camp sites as they travelled down the Cooper before finally selecting Camp No. 65, the Dig tree

site. Wright went as far as Torowoto before turning back to Menindee with Dick, who had refused to continue to the Cooper. Wright arranged for local Aboriginal guides, who, according to Wills, tried to mislead the party by leading them back to Bulloo and then departed.

### *The trooper Lyons event: search and rescue*

Wright returned from Torowoto to the supply party's camp at Pamamaroo Creek with Dick on 5 November 1860. On 10 November, trooper Lyons arrived from Swan Hill with urgent despatches for Burke (from the Exploration Committee, dated 18 October 1860). Wright, with the authority of Burke, took charge of the supply party and arranged for McPherson and Dick, who had just returned from Torowoto, to guide trooper Lyons in an attempt to catch up with Burke's party. They departed on 10 November 1860.



Figure 5.4: 'Depôt Junction: The Bamamoro Cr. with the Darling, 7 miles from Minindie, up the Darling. Nov 1. 60'. Ludwig Becker. 1 November 1860. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

On 19 December, some three weeks after Lyons' party left, Beckler recounted that:

*I saw a native approaching our camp. I would certainly not off [sic] recognised him had not his india rubber water bottle and his clothing led me to think it must be Mountain (Dick) who had left our camp on 10 November with Lyon's and McPherson ... His previously fill [sic] face was sunken, his tottering legs could hardly carry him, his feet were raw, his voice hoarse and whispering. He was the shadow of a man. He laid himself at my feet and looked at me wistfully and soulfully. According to his account they had travelled 400 to 420 miles. The horse had died and they themselves had nothing more to eat. A lack of water had prevented them from completing their journey and they were compelled to turn back. They then attempted to return to the Darling on foot, about 100 miles from there neither Lyons nor MacPherson was able to proceed any further. He had left them at Durroadoo, (Torowoto) where the*

*natives had taken them in. He had come ahead to the Darling to seek help for them (Beckler 1993, p. 48).*

Dick further indicated 'that both (Lyons and McPherson) were very weak and that he did not think the natives would remain with them and find food for them, even though they had promised to do so' (Beckler 1993, p. 49).

Dick's courage was later recognised with an award of a medal (breastplate) at a ceremony in Melbourne in September 1861. It was fitting that this award, the only bravery award made as a result of the expedition, should have been made to an Aborigine.<sup>5</sup>

Beckler offered to travel to Torowoto to bring the two Europeans back to the Darling camp; on 21 December he left with three camels and a horse, accompanied by Belooch and a native guide, Peter, 'to whom Mountain (Dick) had described our route as well as possible'. In their absence, Becker took the opportunity to paint a watercolour of Dick (Tipping 1979, p. 107) (see Figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5: 'Portrait of Dick: the brave and gallant native guide'. Ludwig Becker. 21 December 1860. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.



Five days out, on 26 December, Beckler recorded:

*Peter, who had received his instructions about the track from Dick [Mountain] the evening before our departure, was very excited as he believed we should certainly find Dick's shoes and his saddle today. The poor man had carried them this far on his back. We were to find them at a spot marked by him which was not far distant from the two captives. We were therefore very eager and carefully observed every bush that we passed. Finally Peter shouted out that the saddle was in sight and we found it immediately hanging on a branch. Beneath it were Dick's torn shoes (Beckler 1993, p. 61).*

On the following day, 27 December 1860: *Peter was in high spirits. He was firmly convinced that we would reach Duroodoo [Torowoto] today, where Lyons and Macpherson were and indeed by all calculations we could not be far away ... Peter told us of certain signs that Dick [Mountain] had informed him the natives would lay along the track to let us know*

*that we were in the immediate vicinity of the captives. At intervals along the way, bundles of grass were spread fanlike over our path; without hesitation we took them to be the abovementioned signs of the natives (Beckler 1993, p. 63).*

As they drew nearer to Torowoto they encountered more and more Aborigines. 'Peter was full of eagerness, indeed he showed an interest in the success of our journey that one would have not expected in a native. He rode in some distance ahead of us, his penetrating gaze roaming in all directions. Suddenly he turned about and sprang back towards us, announcing with delight that he could already see MacPherson' (Beckler 1993, p. 64).

They were reunited with Lyons and McPherson, who were both in extremely poor condition. They had been living on nardoo which the natives had shown them how to gather and pound. The rescue party prepared a meal from its supplies, to improve their diet after 'having had insufficient and unbalance nourishment for so long' (see Figure 5.6).



Figure 5.6: McPhersons and Lyons Camp Duroodoo December 27 HB. Sketches of Hermann Beckler, from the original unpublished German edition of Burke's expedition to Central Australia.

### *McPherson's account*

Beckler's account included the following transcription of McPherson's narrative of their journey northward, during which they had followed Burke's camp site trail, and their meetings with native peoples. At their camp on 20 November, during the night they saw in the distance a fire, which they decided to follow up in the morning. The following day they reached the spot only to find at the most a dozen natives camped:

*They shouted at us, 'Bulla, Bulla' and made signs to us to come closer. They then took their spears and accompanied us, continuously shouting, 'Bulla, Bulla'. We travelled over sand hills and grassy plains, but the natives ran ahead of us shouting. They escorted us for a distance of 16 miles, after which we arrived at a deep creek which was full of good water. Marvellous feed for the horse. We now thought that Burke would not be far in front of us. Lyons gave one of the natives a note for Burke. The natives made signs to us to continue our march to Bulla and gave us to understand that we would arrive there at 6 o'clock in the evening ... Dick [Mountain] could not understand the natives. After resting for two hours we went on, put eight to ten miles behind us and came to a creek where we found the natives again, including the one to whom Lyons had given the note. They made signs to us that this was Bulla (Beckler 1993, p. 68).*

The natives were quite insistent that the party should camp there for the night, but Lyons and McPherson travelled a short distance further to a spot where Burke's party had camped. The natives followed and tried to prevent them from travelling further. The party broke free and ultimately made camp in the dark some 7–8 miles from Bulla, then struggled on without feed and water for the horses or people.

On 24 November they decided to turn back. On the return journey, two of the

horses died. They reached Torowoto on 8 December, only to find two Aboriginal tribes engaged in a pitched battle, fighting at close range with boomerangs:

*They did not bother us and immediately after the fight they came over to our group. Dick explained our predicament and they seemed sorry for us, but showed no further interest. Two of the natives that had accompanied Burke for a good stretch from Duroadoo [Torowoto] came to us after Dick had spoken to them and they promised us some water fowl. They stayed with us for two days longer than the other natives, but brought us nourishment only vary [sic] irregularly. Sometimes they brought us an iguana (goanna) at other times a snake or several large insect larvae (Witchetty grubs). In return we gave them all our spare clothing and promised them more shirts and tomahawks (hand-axes) (Beckler 1993, p. 74).*

McPherson observed that the natives used certain seeds as food and thought they could be a valuable means of sustenance if only he could obtain the seeds and the grindstones – there were no stones in the whole region:

*I now gave various articles that I still had to a young native and beseeched her to go with me and show me the seeds. The natives seemed angry, though, when she went with me. She remained with me until I had a small tin dish full of the seeds, after which she promptly disappeared. From now on we went out every day to collect. We crushed them between two stones that we finally found which we made into a dough with some water. In the natives manner we made them into little cakes which we threw on to the glowing coals and left for a few minutes. Several days after we had begun eating this food our continual feeling of hunger disappeared, but the new rough fare affected our intestines and we both became ill with diarrhoea (Beckler 1993, p. 74).*

On 10 December, Dick left with the only horse, in an attempt to seek help from the Darling depot party which he reached on 19 December.

### *Return to the Darling depot*

On 28 December the party left Torowoto. Lyons and McPherson rode on the camels and the rest walked. Near where Dick had left his horse and saddle they found his horse quietly grazing and completely recovered. Beckler, ever ready to further his botanical collecting, took a side trip with Peter to the Gonningberri mountains where, as usual, water became an immediate problem. They were searching for water when suddenly Peter reined his horse, dismounted and pointed to a spot on the ground: 'You see this? A Dingo has scratched here for water and we will certainly find water enough for us and our horse' (Beckler 1993, p. 78).

They soon found water under slabs of rock and in a depression which quickly filled enough for them to quench the thirst and that of their horses. The following day they left the range to find the party. As night fell they were still a long way from the meeting point when they came across Belooch wandering through the bush in a daze. He had become lost after going ahead to follow a track; when he returned Lyons and McPherson had gone. The augmented group proceeded and Peter saw a distant fire which they hoped would be that of Lyons and McPherson.

Peter led the way to a broad creek where the fire was blazing on the opposite bank, in the camp site of a large group of natives. 'They waded across the creek to meet us and when they recognised Peter as one of their own, they became very excited and crowded around us giving us the universal greeting "Belara, Knappa, balera, imba, imba, belara" (Good, I good, you good), which we could repeat ... Peter who spoke the same language could hardly tell them enough of our adventures and he seemed to take great interest in the excitement of his countrymen'

(Beckler 1993, pp. 81–82). Beckler described the camp as 'A marvellous sight. It consisted of a row of small huts which were made out of branches and leaned against low scrub; the many well attended fires threw an abundance of light on to the banks that the smallest objects could be distinguished' (Beckler 1993, p. 82).

*They asked them whether they had seen our companions and they promised to lead us to them. After many questions and endless conversations involved with Peter, three guides finally led us to Lyon's and MacPherson's camp site, where we arrived after midnight and were reunited. We gave the guides gifts and hoped to depart early in the morning. However, while we were breakfasting the whole tribe descended upon us. They were good natured and were delighted to see us again. As we had a large stock of provisions we decided to give them all that we could spare. They were overjoyed and took pains to show their gratitude in every way (Beckler 1993, p. 82).*

During the packing-up it was discovered that an axe had disappeared. Peter was instructed to ask the Aborigines to return the axe, which they did with words and gestures which looked like apologies. They gave Peter a gift of a waterbag made from kangaroo skin which retained the shape of the animal. It was sewn very cleanly and carefully and, according to Beckler (1993, p. 82) was decidedly the nicest native object that he had ever seen.

The party reached the camp at the Darling Junction (Pamamaroo Creek) during the early hours of 5 January 1861.

### *Wright and the supply party's journey to Torowoto*

On 26 January 1861, the supply party departed from the Darling depot where it had camped for the past three months. Becker had not been idle: besides undertaking daily meteorological observations he had completed some 20 sketches and had

submitted written reports. He made several drawings of the Indigenous peoples of the Darling (see Figures 5.7–5.9).

The party consisted of Wright as leader, Hermann Beckler, Ludwig Becker, Charles Stone, William Hodgkinson, William Purcell, John Smith and Belooch, with 13 horses and 10 camels. They headed northward to Mootwingee then on to Torowoto. The difficulties experienced with the animals during the first day of travel (the unruly horses and camels had been generally idle for over three months) and the consequential lost baggage meant that the party had to make camp only a short way up the Darling. It took two days to calm the fractious animals and repair damaged baggage and stores. Dick accompanied the party to this camping spot but after borrowing a clean shirt he disappeared, not to be seen again.

Although the party had earlier stored water at a number of intermediate sites, the stores were either not found or if

found, were dry. When they finally reached Mootwingee on 31 January, the animals were saved only by dumping equipment and stores and being driven to a reservoir in the nearby hills.

The party left Mootwingee on 6 February for Torowoto, which was reached on 13 February after a trip in intense summer heat and with almost non-existent water. Fortunately, water was still available at Torowoto.

A few hours after their arrival 15–16 natives visited their camp (see Figure 5.10). They were the first natives that the party had seen during the journey:

*... they seem astonished at us and our animals. They were very friendly and talkative. They were nearly all daubed with clay and were ugly, wretched creatures. Most of them were bathed in sweat and even at some distance their odour was extremely unpleasant, like*



Figure 5.7: 'No. 40. Mr. Shirt. Mr. Nogood. Missis Mallee. Natives on the Darling. Darling Depot, Jan. 12. 1861'. Ludwig Becker. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.





Figure 5.8: 'Native from the Darling. 14 Febr. 1861'. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.





Figure 5.9: 'Group of natives at Menindee, Darling'. Ludwig Becker. [1860?]. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.



Figure 5.10: 'L.B. Feb.21.61. Arrival of the Party at Duroadoo'. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

*that of all natives. We gave them various things to eat and they immediately set up camp close to ours. They were noisy and in high spirits until late into the night. Our Artist, Dr Becker, was of the opinion that two women with pendulous breasts and of unkempt appearance, both incidentally ugly, frequently presented themselves in the attitude of Venus de Medici. In the opinion of the others, they were merely standing holding one arm over their breasts to protect themselves from the flies, while the other was swang to so as to fend off these pests (Beckler 1993, p. 112).*

Beckler noted that they called their small children 'babes'. Wright and McPherson gave gifts of shirts and an axe they had brought for that purpose, and to an old man who complained of the cold 'we gave a woollen blanket as well as a shirt' (Beckler 1993, p. 113).

Two members of the tribe were selected to accompany the party to Bulloo. As Wright explained, 'I selected two of them and gave them each a shirt. They were well acquainted with the various creeks and named several places in advance, but our mutual ignorance of each other's language, rendered it impossible to obtain any serviceable information' (Tipping 1979, p. 176).

### *From Torowoto to Mudplains camp*

The party departed from Torowoto on 15 February with the two native guides, following Burke's tracks. About 3 miles out, the natives indicated that the party would need to leave the track as it was leading into waterless country. Wright did not want to leave the track as they had no way of knowing where they were. The natives openly expressed their regret and turned back, leaving the party to continue alone. The party reached its next camp (Mudplains camp) where its water problems became critical, so much so that the party had to make regular return trips to Torowoto to obtain water. One time they found a site

which had received fresh water from a passing storm. On 21 February Wright set off in a northerly direction with Smith, Belooch and four camels, to find a route to Bulloo. The remaining party reached Rat Point on 26 February then moved on to Poria Creek.

On 1 March they were visited by a group of Aborigines, some smeared with fat and recently painted. Stone understood their talking and gesticulating to mean that they were complaining about Hodgkinson's shooting, which had disturbed their food source (see Chapter 2). Hodgkinson was scaring the ducks away and the Aborigines demanded that the party leave and return to the Darling or Bulloo. On 6 March Hodgkinson was absent on a trip to fetch water, which allowed the Aborigines to hunt ducks in peace. They came to the camp during the evening with two excellent ducks as if to express their appreciation for the absence of shooting. In return, Beckler and his party gave them some dried meat. Fortunately the ducks then disappeared from the swamp, so the natives no longer tried to hunt there.

The party at Torowoto comprised Beckler, Stone and Hodgkinson. Wright's reconnaissance party had ridden north and was overdue, and Becker and Belooch were still at the Mudplains Camp with Hodgkinson providing water on a shuttle basis.

### *From Mudplains camp to Bulloo*

Hodgkinson brought news that Becker and Belooch were ill and the Torowoto party decided to move everything to the Mudplains Camp on 10 March: 'at breakfast a very hungry group of natives stood around us and we gave them everything we could spare and they parted with mutual expressions of friendliness' (Beckler 1993, p. 129). Beckler believed that the natives of Torowoto belonged to different tribes, 'the Macquarra and the Killparra' (Beckler 1993, p. 129). However, these are not the names of tribes but of two matrilineal moieties common to all Aboriginal peoples along the Darling from

Bourke to Wentworth and along the Murray from Wentworth to Euston (Hercus 2011, p. 3).

The Torowoto party reached Mudplains camp during the afternoon; Wright's party had returned the previous evening with an unfavourable description of Bulloo. However, they decided to move the party there after a return to Torowoto to replenish the horses and camels and the establishment of a water depot about 12 miles north of Mudplains camp, so that they could travel over nearly 100 miles of waterless country.

On 12 March the camel party set off to the water depot; during the evening the camels, let free at Wright's directions, went missing. They were found a day later and it was decided that Belooch would take them back to Torowoto for further supplies of water. Beckler's greatest worry was now for Belooch, who was alone with the camels at Torowoto.

### *Incident at Kooliatto Creek*

The party restarted the journey to Bulloo on 15 March, the camels loaded with waterbags. They reached the advance camp at Kooliatto Creek at midday on the following day. Illness had started to make its impact: all members of the party were sick and some were suffering the onset of scurvy. Becker and Purcell were in such a condition that Beckler stayed to nurse them at Kooliatto Creek while the remainder of the party went on to Bulloo. As the Bulloo party moved off three Aborigines arrived, and Wright called them over and gave them a packhorse to lead. Wright indicated that Beckler should not worry about the natives as he would take them to Bulloo:

*Their appearance was different from the natives on the Darling or at Torowoto. They were tall, slim well-built, their legs were less crooked than those of the others, they had high foreheads, somewhat longer noses and the angle between the nose and forehead was less obtuse. They looked neither very friendly nor very wild. On their shoulders they*

*carried several horizontal artificial scars. Both their genitals and the cleft between their buttocks were covered with a decorative tassel a foot in length and 2 to 3 inches broad. They were bound around their loins with a double or treble cord (Beckler 1993, p. 151).*

Invading rats and flies made living conditions intolerable for Beckler and the two invalids.

The camp site was visited daily by small number of Aborigines, who always inquired how long the party would stay at the site:

*They were freshly painted and adorned with feathers in their hair and also wore very neatly worked fish or bird nets slung three or four times around their loins. Again they questioned me about the date of our departure and pointing in a northerly direction cried 'Bulla, Bulla'. One of them made strange rowing movements with both arms. He pointed to his breasts, made kiss-like motions with his lips, pointed in the direction of his camp and gestured to me to come with him. In a confidential, helpful, almost pleading manner and with most tender modulations that his voice seemed capable of, he continually cried 'Ana, ana, ana, ana'. I soon understood him very clearly as he carried on with other gestures, but was not in the least disposed to visit his black beauty, or in other words, be struck dead, for this is the meaning of such invitation in inland Australia (Beckler 1993, p. 154).*

That visit was followed by one from a larger group of some 17 Aborigines, all decorated and freshly painted, armed with shields and boomerangs and some with spears.

*None seemed to be over thirty years old and a few were well built with not unpleasant features, while others had truly devilish visages. When they saw how attentively I observed them they immediately struck themselves on their*

*chest and shouted out, some Macquarra, others Killpara. A young well-built one eyed lad gesticulated violently and seemed very excited. He wore a Garibaldi shirt which he had stolen a few days earlier and I took the liberty of pointing out this disgraceful deed to him by striking him severely on the ear (Beckler 1993, p. 155).*

The group closely surrounded Beckler then left, going quietly after some apparent consultation. During the afternoon, Beckler heard howling and singing at a great distance; it appeared that the Aboriginal community was departing. Their route passed the camp site, some drifted towards the camp and soon it was surrounded, the Aborigines taking anything that was available. They were keenly interested in the state of Becker and Purcell, lying extremely ill inside the tent. The one-eyed shirt thief drew particular attention to himself and his lively speech impressed the tribe. An Aboriginal elder became involved. He remonstrated with the one-eyed young Aborigine then indicated to Beckler that the group was leaving to travel up the creek and would return in four days, and that the Europeans should be gone prior to their return. The Kooliatto Creek camp returned to peace, although the expedition members could still hear in the distance some sounds from the Aborigines' new camp site. On 12 April Hodgkinson rode back from Bulloo to see how the party was doing; he stayed only one day at Kooliatto Creek. Finally Hodgkinson and Belooch arrived at Kooliatto to help, and the party left for Bulloo.

### *At Bulloo and the skirmish*

There were now three dying men – Stone was unwell, and Becker and Purcell were dying from scurvy. Adding to the general misery, the camp was infested with rats.

On 21 April a fire was flared up about a mile away and some Aboriginal people were seen to be on the move. The camp site was made ready for an attack, but Wright fired

their largest rifle and let off a large rockets in the direction of the presumed attack. This action seemed to silence the Aborigines, who disappeared after making loud noises in response.

The following day the party was visited by a group of Aborigines who, through gestures, indicated that they wanted the Europeans to leave. The visits became a regular occurrence. On one occasion the Aborigines indicated that they knew the location of Burke's track and offered to guide the party to the spot. One Aborigine was so impressive and courteous that Wright gave him a cap and shirt and from then on he was named 'Mr Shirt'. Wright and Smith joined Mr Shirt and were taken on 'a wild goose chase' through the bush looking for Burke's track, which Mr Shirt could not find. In fact, he had led them into a trap.

Wright and Smith camped for the night away from the large body of Aborigines and refused an offer to visit the women, presuming the real reason for the invitation was to beat them to death. The Aborigines then circled their camp with fires, as if to prevent their escape. However, Wright and Smith were able to slip away, grab their horses and ride to the safety of Bulloo.

The Aborigines prepared to attack the camp, which was now fortified with stores in a defensive position. About 18 Aborigines approached the camp, with Mr Shirt in the lead. Mr Shirt, 'a born diplomat, ignored the orders to stay away, came closer and in a sign language which he supported with quiet flowing speech, explained that we must leave the site as the area belonged to his tribe and they were coming here to celebrate a feast ... And that neighbouring tribes were also coming in large numbers to drive us away' (Beckler 1993, p. 167). Mr Shirt repeated his demand and at the same time surreptitiously moved forward.

Wright took Mr Shirt by the collar and thrust him back to the crowd. Mr Shirt repeated the threats and the stand-off continued for about three hours. After



exhausting all entreaties, the party attacked the Aborigines and drove them off, with Shirt the last to leave (see Figure 5.11). All the party's cooking utensils had been stolen, as well as some rats which had been intended for the evening meal. The party fortified the camp with wood in the form of a palisade in readiness for a return attack.

Stone died that evening (22 April) and was buried by the creek. On 24 April Purcell died, and was buried next to Stone.

On the morning of 27 April about 45 Aborigines appeared, moving quickly across the plain and led by Mr Shirt. At the same time a group of approximately 50 Aborigines were moving down the creek towards the camp site at full speed – when they were approximately 20 paces away, Wright ordered the party to fire. A few fell, several apparently from fright. Mr Shirt was severely wounded and the remainder quickly retreated. Mr Shirt staggered to his feet and, after hurling a curse at the party, hobbled away to follow the retreating tribe. The

camels disappeared during the melee, chased off by the Aborigines. They were recovered and brought back to the camp.

The Aborigines regrouped about a mile away and Wright fired in their direction to reassert his party's superior firepower. During the night there were loud noises and a lament from the natives, then all was quiet.

### *Meeting with Brahe's returning party*

During the morning of 29 April bells were heard in the distance, heralding the arrival of part of Burke's party. Brahe and his party informed the Bulloo group that they had departed the Cooper Creek depot on 21 April, having waited five weeks over time in the vain hope of Burke's party's return. Patten was extremely ill and McDonough was limping from a damaged knee and was exhibiting the first stages of scurvy. On 30 April Becker died; he was buried alongside the graves of Stone and Purcell.



Figure 5.11: 'Bulla, Queensland, 1861'. William Oswald Hodgkinson. Watercolour. National Library of Australia. PIC/11535/46 LOC MS SR Cab 3/9.

### *The return from Bulloo to the Darling*

On 1 May 1861, the party, now consisting of nine expedition members, 21 horses and 16 camels, departed Bulloo for the Darling. The Aborigines were nowhere to be seen but two rows of columns of smoke were rising, one from a row of hills and the other from along the creek ahead of their route, signalling their departure. Signal fires, as distinct from bush burnings, were regularly used by Indigenous tribes to indicate the movement of groups, particularly 'strangers', passing through their territories, as a warning to other tribes.

The party stopped at the Kooliatto Creek camp site to give the invalids and Brahe's animals an opportunity to recuperate after crossing the waterless country from Cooper Creek.

On 3 May Brahe and Wright returned to Cooper Creek in case Burke's party had returned in their absence. They did not realise that Burke, Wills and King had returned and were wandering through the bush along the creek, hoping for rescue in South Australia via Mt Hopeless.

Brahe and Wright returned on 13 May to find the party still at the Kooliatto Creek camp site. Patten had become extremely ill and the horses and camels were nowhere to be found. By 21 May the party was able to leave, with the horses and most of the camels, but their departure was delayed until 23 May because of McDonough's illness and the need to construct a suitable bed for Patten.

Patten died on 5 June and was buried at Rat Point. On arrival at Torowoto the party found that the creeks which had abundant water during the outward journey were now dry. However, some rain had fallen and there was just enough water. At the next camp site the camels disappeared again and were only found by midday after an exhaustive search.

Wright and Brahe had gone ahead with the horses and met several Aborigines who were overjoyed to see the party again. These were the Aborigines who Beckler, Belooch

and Peter had met during their first trip to Torowoto in search of trooper Lyons and McPherson. They led Wright and Brahe to an excellent water hole. Beckler recorded that 'The natives, to whom we gave plenty of flour, sugar, tea and meat, made their camp very close to ours and laughed and ate noisily through half the night ... The Wonamente natives had such trust in us that a lad who showed a desire to come with us was allowed to do so. He showed no regret at temporarily leaving his wild home, or at least not yet. Incidentally, care was taken for his safe return and his parents were guaranteed it' (Beckler 1993, p. 185).

The party continued and found that surface water was dried up; however, sufficient water was obtained by digging in the various creek beds. They reached the depot at the junction of the Darling River and Pamamaroo Creek on 19 June 1861.

### **The events at Cooper Creek: the depot party's experiences at Camp 65**

With the departure of Burke's Gulf party on 16 December 1860, the depot party, led by Brahe with Patten, McDonough and Dost Mahomet, began constructing a stockade 20 feet by 18 feet on the high bank of the Cooper between the coolibah trees (later the celebrated Dig trees). The three-sided stockade was completed on 23 December with the open side affording a view of the open ground away from the Cooper where tents had been erected and camels were tethered during the night. Inside the stockade was Burke's tent and an ammunition store.

This activity soon attracted local Aborigines and large and small groups of natives continually appeared at the camp site. Petty thieving occurred and small groups used the topography of the site, with its high bank at the edge of the dry creek bed, to come close to the camp. Despite Burke's instructions that the natives, which

he thought would become troublesome 'should be shot at once', Brahe adopted a more conciliatory approach and set up a camp perimeter:

*A large number of natives came to the camp, whose demeanour roused my suspicions. Got hold of a young native and shoved him off, when he fell down. In the afternoon the whole tribe returned, the men armed, some with spears and some with boomerangs: most of them had painted their faces and bodies. I met them at a short distance from the camp and marking a circle around it, I gave them to understand that they would be fired at if they entered it. On some of them crossing the line, I fired off my gun into the branches of a tree, when they retired and did not molest us any more (Brahe 1861).*

The perimeter was generally observed by the natives.

Towards the end of the expedition's stay at the Cooper the number of natives passing the camp became less numerous but cordial relations remained. Offerings of fish and nets were made, but 'We made it a rule never to accept the least thing from them, but made some of them little presents of left off clothes' (Brahe 1861).

Apart from the incident described above, Brahe's evidence to the Commission of Inquiry on 27 November 1861 was that in general the natives were not troublesome and that both parties had become tolerant of one another (Victoria 1861–62, pp. 12–13).

## Aboriginal contributions to the expedition: a retrospective analysis

Despite a suggestion by Kerwin (2010, p. xviii) that 'Burke and Wills had no Aboriginal people to guide them and are better known for their failure', this chapter has shown that the expedition was heavily reliant on the engagement of Aboriginal guides once it crossed into the unsettled areas north of the Murray. Aboriginal guides

played a crucial part in the expedition's progress to Menindee and during the initial stages of the advance party's travel to Cooper Creek, after which the navigating skills of Wills led the Gulf party along the 140th meridian to the Gulf. Aboriginal guides played a significant role in the supply party's progress, and Dick and Peter's importance in guiding Beckler's party and saving trooper Lyons and McPherson was outstanding.

Aboriginal expertise was essential for the supply party, which had been left without instruments and which had no real ability to navigate northwards to Cooper Creek. They were simply expected to follow the tracks of Burke's advance party, left some three months earlier. The supply party had Wright's bush skills and his experience of earlier travel with the advance party to Torowoto, but these were of limited assistance as the party was now travelling northward in the heat of the summer in a totally different waterless environment. In many places Burke's track had disappeared and the supply party had no knowledge of where Burke's party had camped. They therefore relied on the ability of their Aboriginal guides to find traces of the track and to find water for the animals and themselves. The party would have done better if it had always relied on the guides' expertise: Wright's decision, shortly after leaving Torowoto, to follow Burke's track, much against the guides' wishes, and head into waterless country rather than follow the Aborigines' preferred route, resulted in the party unnecessarily spending four weeks in waterless and difficult country which caused them great hardship. Not only did they have to endlessly backtrack over vast distances to Torowoto to obtain water, but they also became engaged in confrontations with Aborigines at various camp sites over water and interference with food-gathering – in Aboriginal eyes, they were trespassing. The difficulties of travelling through this country accelerated the illnesses of the three members who died at Bulloo.

## The search for water

The late departure of the exploring expedition, on 20 August 1860, from Melbourne meant that the various exploring parties had great difficulty finding adequate water supplies during their travels at the height of summer. While Burke's advance party to the Cooper travelled in relative comfort with water and feed available for the camels and horses, the situation was very different for Wright's supply party, which departed from Pamamaroo Creek in the intense heat of January 1861. The skill of the Aboriginal guides in being able to read the geology and topography of the land, the movement of birds and the actions of animals in their quest to find water in 'waterless' country were instrumental in supporting the supply party.

## Conclusion

While it is easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to suggest that if certain actions or decisions had taken place the outcomes of the ill-fated expedition would have been different, it is possible to make some basic observations about certain actions which should have been taken. The most fundamental mistake made by Burke and his expedition officers (and the Exploration Committee) was their failure to recognise or even understand the culture and way of life of the Indigenous peoples of the unsettled districts of Central Australia. The expedition was exploring an alien environment that had been inhabited for thousands of years; one would have thought that its Instructions would have specified that the expedition should go out of its way to engage or connect with the Aboriginal population. Other exploring parties, including Howitt's relief party, recruited Aboriginal guides or ambassadors with the linguistic and navigational skills that would enable them to communicate and engage with other groups as they travelled through various linguistic territories. The engagement of Dick and Peter is a perfect example of this approach, and their support to the

expedition as a whole proved immeasurable. The progress of the expedition across the continent would have been monitored. The Gulf party's return to the Cooper would have been noted: had Brahe's party developed a better relationship with the local tribes they could have told of the party's return through tribal networks of message sticks or signal fires (for Aboriginal use of these, see Ch. 15). The supply party's departure from Bulloo had been noticed and transmitted to tribes along the track by a series of signal fires. Such signals might have averted the tragic events of 21 April 1861 at Cooper Creek, when Burke's returning party missed Brahe's party at the Dig tree only by hours.

## Endnotes

- 1 Beckler wrote *Burkes Entdeckungsreise: Eine Reise nach Zentral-Australien* ('Burke's expedition: a journey to Central Australia') after his return to Germany in 1862. It was unpublished and its existence emerged only through Joseph Heider's (1954) article 'Hermann Beckler' in Polnitz (1954, vol. 3, pp. 419–444). Beckler's publication was translated from German by Dr Stephen Jeffries and Dr Michael Kertesz, edited by Jeffries and published in 1993 as *A Journey to Cooper's Creek*. The change in title is interesting, as in 1860 the expedition's intention was to cross the largely unknown centre of Australia. When the expedition was subdivided into three groups Beckler's group (the supply party led by Wright) tried to reach Cooper Creek, only to fail some 180 kms short.
- 2 Professor Johannes Voigt's translation, *Beckler: Hermann. Entdeckungen in Australien: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen eines Deutschen 1855–1862* (Becker, Hermann: *Discoveries in Australia: Letters and Reports of a German 1855–1862*), was introduced and explained by Voigt in Osterhammel and Reichert (2000, vol. 9). The book provides a masterly edited translation of Beckler's Old German hand-written letters to his brother Karl



from the time he left Germany in 1855 until his departure from Australia in 1862. The edited highlights of the letters follow Beckler's thoughts and Australian experiences from his landing in Moreton Bay, his attempts to establish a medical practice, his botanising and his interests in the Aborigines, his droving experience to New South Wales and his joining the expedition. It includes a number of illustrations (small vignettes embedded in his letters) as well as a selection of pencil sketches from the expedition which were discovered in the Heimatmuseum in Hoechststadt.

- 3 One of the main aims of Blandowski's Murray River Expedition of 1856–57 was to record the life and times of Aboriginal communities along the Murray before they became extinct. The natural history collecting role of the expedition led to the engagement of Aboriginal communities and allowed Blandowski and his assistant Krefft to amass a collection of plant and animal specimens and to interact with and study the various Indigenous communities.
- 4 There appears to have been some confusion about the name of the Aborigine 'Dick', who was referred to as either 'Dick' or 'Mountain'. Haverfield, writing 'Jottings in the North' in the *Bendigo Advertiser* of 26 October 1861, recorded that when seeking to recruit an Aboriginal guide at Menindee he contacted an Aborigine of 'considerable influence' known as 'Old Mountain' and a guide (Mr Jacky) was obtained. It is likely that Dick was either a member of Old Mountain's tribe or was his relation. The name 'Dick' was engraved on the breastplate awarded by the Royal Society of Victoria for the rescue of trooper Lyons and McPherson (see endnote 5).
- 5 Extract from the *Bendigo Advertiser* (26 September 1861, p. 3).  
PRESENTATION TO A BLACK FELLOW  
On Monday afternoon [Monday 23

September 1861] at the Hall of the Royal Society, His Excellency Henry Barkly, in the presence of several gentlemen, presented Dick, (the aborigine who materially assisted in rescuing Lyons and McPherson from the perils of the Australian interior), with a brass plate and chain and five sovereigns, as a reward for his gallant conduct on that occasion. His Excellency, in making the presentation said:- 'Dick. I understand that this has been given to you by the Queen's Government for rescuing Trooper Lyons and Saddler McPherson. Every black fellow who sees you will know what you received this for.'

His Excellency on handing the dingy hero the five sovereigns expressed a hope that he would not spend it in drink, as too many of his race were prone to do; and Sir Henry also adverted to the native who had seen the two white men on the raft near Cooper's Creek, 'regretting that the witness did not lend them some assistance'. The testimonial bore the following inscription:- 'Presented to Dick by the Exploration Expedition for assisting Trooper Lyons and Saddler McPherson, December, 1860.' Dick, we believe, returned to Menindie on Wednesday.

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APPENDIX 5.1:

**Extracts from the 1861 Anniversary Address of the Royal Society of Victoria delivered by the President, His Excellency Sir Henry Barkly KCB on 8 April 1861**

In referring to the papers which had been delivered at the meeting of the Society during the past year (1860), the President remarked (Barkly 1865, pp. xx–xxi):

*... and lastly, a paper by Mr Wilhelmi, 'On the Manners and Customs of the Natives of the Port Lincoln District,' containing much valuable information on a subject which I would take the opportunity of impressing on the attention of the Royal Society, with a view to the institution of immediate and systematic inquiries of a similar nature within our own territory. Whole tribes of the original occupants of the soil are, under some mysterious dispensation, rapidly disappearing, and the links which their dialects and traditions might supply to the ethnologist, will, without some effort on our part, be lost for ever.*

*When at Omeo, two years since, the last survivor of the numerous warlike tribe which had disputed possession with early settlers only a quarter of a century before, was presented to me, and I fear, from official reports which have come under my notice, that in other districts, despite all the efforts of the newly-constituted Board for the Protection of the Aborigines can make, this unfortunate race is fast becoming extinct.*

His Excellency further remarked in reference to the Victorian Exploring Expedition (Barkly 1865, pp. xxvii–xxviii):

*When I delivered my last inaugural address the arrangements connected with the proposed expedition, including the most important of all – the appointment of a leader – remained to be made. With a single exception, the aspirants to this post of difficulty and danger could boast little personal acquaintance with Australian exploration. They still had their spurs to win. The choice of the committee fell on a gentleman of whom I will only on this occasion say, that he has as yet done nothing to discredit the confidence reposed in him, and that if courage, disinterestedness, and a firm determination to succeed in crossing the desert despite all obstacles, were amongst the foremost qualifications for the leadership, no better selection could have been made.*

*Before Mr Burke was well out of the settled districts, rumours reached us of that extraordinary journey of Mr Stuart's, from the adjacent colony, which if it has not altogether solved the problem of Australian geography, has at any rate obliged the most learned geographers of the day to confess themselves mistaken in assuming the whole interior of the continent to be either an arid and inhospitable desert or a vast central lake.*

*To the veteran South Australian explorer it still remains to complete his track from Chambers' Creek to the westward of Lake*

*Torrens to Stokes' Victoria river on the north coast, or to Arnhem's Land, and we are aware that he started from that spot on the first day of the present year with a larger party and ampler equipment, bent on still claiming the honour of being the first to cross the continent.*

*As regards his Victorian competitor – I will not call him rival – in this glorious race, Mr Burke, we might long since have looked to hear of his arrival at the pre-concerted depot on Cooper's Creek, and of his departure thence to skirt the eastern border of the desert, as the shortest route to the Gulf of Carpentaria, but for the delay which occurred in the transmission of the second portion of the stores from the Darling, which probably deterred him from sending back a messenger with the*

*news of his movements. We know that the rest of the party with these stores left the camp on that river on the 24th of January, so that we may soon expect to receive intelligence of their junction, or of the course Mr Burke had adopted in their absence. It is certainly possible that he may have pushed on towards the northern coast without awaiting their arrival, but, as he was fully aware that no arrangement was in contemplation for sending a vessel to meet him there, he is not likely to have gone beyond the point from which, with the aid of the camels, he could fall back on his supplies; and there seems, therefore, no ground for anxiety as to his safety, though, of course, we must be prepared to act promptly, according to the tenor of the first advices which may reach us.*



**English translation of Beckler H (1867) *Corroberri: Ein Beitrag zur Kenntniss der Musik bei den australischen Ureinwohnern* Globus 13, 82–84.**

### **Corroboree: a contribution to the knowledge of the music of the Australian Aborigines**

At last, I did have the opportunity to attend a Corroboree. I was on the border of the Darling Downs, that fertile and charming district of Queensland, the territory of the kings of sheep and wool farming, when I heard that the natives were preparing to hold a Corroboree. My heart swelled at the thought of the impending pleasure which I had been looking in vain for such a long time.

As the starting time had already elapsed, I hurried as fast as I could. A clear bright moon light shone over the forest, and from afar, the audible wild voices and the widely metallic sounding blades of boomerangs, those interesting weapon of the natives, whose strange rotary movements in the air has given thought to the greatest mathematicians and astronomers; soon led me in the right direction, and shortly afterwards I found myself in the camp of the savages.

Today was a so-called big Corroboree and, including women and children, had brought together, probably two hundred natives. They had come here from far away, arriving during the past few days.

Only the men dance or lead the Corroboree which can best be compared with a ballet. In the foreground the women and children sat in irregular rows. In front

of them and at each end of the dancing ground, of the stage I should say, fires blazed fiercely. In front of the women and in line with the fires, stood or squatted four men in very low stooping positions who, knocking rhythmically and powerfully boomerangs together that kept the beat. Just then the boomerangs stopped and the loud chorus just died away, only a faint plaintive, half singing whispering came from the ranks of the women, while the men, standing in long lines in front of the women, at the sudden stopping of the song, like overcome by tragic anguish, slowly turned and drew back in groups.

After a short time the Boomerangs begin to clap, together the men move close to the fire. First they move like an attack in two groups against each other they make some vague figures. Then they step back into line, the chorus begins, louder and louder the singing, all stomping their feet alternately and with the rapid beat so that the ground resounds with the rapid strokes of the Boomerangs. The noise is created by the fact that the women who hold a spherical or drum-like inverted opossum skin cover between their thighs and hit out on this with both hands, while others worked on the surface of their bare thighs. Still maintaining their enthusiasm, but suddenly, as with a blow the noise is over, and only the half singing, whispering complaints of women survives the choir, just as it precedes the same. Thus, that just described is often

repeated throughout the whole evening and into the night.

Probably changes also occur. Sometimes they stay longer and make the same figures more often. Shortly after the start of the chorus, all run to the nearest bushes and trees and break off long branches which lay before themselves on the ground, on which they all like swimming with both arms to perform downward movements. After they pick up the branches to keep them into the air make a few steps to the side, lie them down again and do the same swimming movements upwards and in different directions. The chorus goes on incessantly.

But what music?

A piece of music of the nature of untamed primitive creatures, similar to the hum of insects, the murmur of the water, the whispering of the wind and the howling of the storm. Other songs and corroborees are unequally more musical; the one heard at this evening, however, can be called musical only as an imitation of the bare skeleton (of music). Three blows of the boomerang start the beginning, with a lightening quick beat. The rhythm is of the strictest exactness, the intonation unique in its purity, the introduced octaves by the women and children are a delight in their purity rarely heard in the best European opera chorus.

It is an altogether flawless harmony. In this, – in the introduced pure octave, the strict rhythm, the gradual increase from piano to the wildest fortissimo, combined with the growing speed of the beat and the sudden stop which on occasions are followed by individual notes separated by long pauses like additional beats, – lies the impressive nature of the music. The wild impression is increased by the peculiarity of the singing in which all the notes which are stressed, indeed, I would say, almost all is sung on expiration. Every time, with a convulsive slurping they are heard to take breath, which they squander again with a visible effort. During this almost breathless singing, with visible excitement of the singer, an almost

continual pounding of feet and similar movements of the arms, the Corroboree has to be exhaustive work.

If we now image the scenery and the images of this performance, under a cloudless sky, a growing crescent of the moon over the grand outlines of huge eucalyptus trees, the blindingly bright illumination given by the twigs, branches and leaves of the eucalyptus trees, and the even deeper darkness in the background and a windless balmy air, some readers might well envy me the enjoyment I have had.

For the European audience a Corroboree is really a spectacle (a piece of theatre), for these in the highest degree involved excited actors whose every fibre shakes, costumed in delightful ways, are in fact worlds apart from the ill-spirited, sleepy, loitering, blacks covered in dirty rags encountered during the day, who are, despite their occasional wants, are so lazy that they surly and reluctantly for a shiny sixpence fetch a bucket of water.

The wild curly hair, which hangs down in large bundles and sausages, is festively decorated and most impressive. Tall plumes sway proudly from the head; in others more various feathers of (all) kinds and sizes are stuck in the hair, like pins in a pincushion. Beautifully crafted headbands, crocheted by indigenous women, lime or chalk smeared to keep fresh, keep the hair together. Many have the red shaggy tail of a dingo (Australian dog) tied over the crown and chin, which looks especially wild and grotesque. Also, for such occasions the native youths have a hole in the nasal septum, in order to push through a foot long stick or a piece of reed. Their black skin today is lubricated with grease. Cheeks, chest, back and limbs are painted in various ways, with red and white straight and curved lines and snake like rings being drawn. Everyone has his little bark shield and nobody is absent today from the feast wearing the foot long ridiculously narrow pubic belt made from tassels.

The song remained the same throughout the evening and was repeated after

prolonged or repeated shorter breaks. But later it did not have the serious, solemn, passionate character, as in the beginning. It was apparent that some in the midst of the song made bad jokes in order to cause the others to laugh. This probably came from the fact that the settlers had brought spirits as an encouragement and thanks for the indulgence and pleasure. This turned finally the solemn Corroboree begun earlier into a wild revelry; the blacks became so drunk that they were incapable of finding their Gunyahs built from sticks and brushes.

Thus it comes on such occasions, as happens also with us Europeans, to violent outbursts, fights and, what is perhaps not surprising, to sometimes nasty wounds which are all the worse if weapons such as old sheep-shears, old sabre blades or sharp pointed pieces of tinsplate are used. I have to thank a similar situation and outcome for the (recording of the) lament or mourning song that I reported below.

During a fight following the Corroboree a black man was very badly wounded in the back of the knee. The savages nursed him with the utmost care and loving sympathy, but on the third night they seemed to take the condition of their brother to be hopeless and struck up a mournful dirge.

I was in bed. It was close to midnight. Suddenly I heard strange musical tone, at first as from a distance, then coming back through the roughly hewn planks (slabs) of the walls of my room. Then it was like the hum of a large fly. It was too weird and caught my attention too much that I could

not sleep. I jumped up and listened at the open door. It was a song of the savages. Then I saw opposite on the rising bank of the river (the Condamine River) an illuminated camp. A burning tree, literally a pillar of fire glowed and crackled through the silent night and a gentle airflow carried the uninterrupted flow of the melody clearly to me, note by note, – in fact, a sublime choral song (Action or Death song).

Years went by and I had heard no other Corroboree, although in the meantime, I often came into contact with these savages not touched by civilisation. When returning from our journey to Central Australia, during a prolonged stay on the Upper Darling, I had again the pleasure to witness once again. The detail of the same description would take up too much space, but the Corroboree (Corroboree II) was delightful. This may only be the makings of a song, or hymn, which will find a place, if the music and lyrics are played faithfully. I was told later that it was a prayer, a request of their God to prevent a great evil, or perhaps a disease from them. Here I can find space only for the beginning of a song, a hymn, if you will, but recording music and text faithfully.

The last Corroboree (Corroboree III), a song full of strength and courage, I owe to a German friend, who was the superintendent of a sheep station. He was able to remember any tune and knew many songs of the natives, note for note, word for word. The song comes from the northern regions of Queensland, from the vicinity of Gayndah.

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**Corroboree I. Darling Downs.**

**160, later 180 and more.**

Wa'h!                      Wa'h!                      Wa'h!

**Plaintive or Death song.**

**- 60 or even slower. E minor**

**Corroboree II. Upper Darling River. Menindee.**

**-84 E minor**

Bai — — in — — di — — Bai — — in — — di — —  
 ba-le — — ma — — ba-le — — gna on — — bai — —  
 in — — di — — bai — — in — — di — — gna - on - ba - le — .

**Corroboree III. Gayndah, Queensland.**



# Language notes connected to the journey of the expedition as far as the Cooper

*Luise Hercus*

## Introduction: the languages

This chapter is intended to give some linguistic background to the journey of the expedition through New South Wales and to the Cooper. Figure 6.1, which is an adaptation of the map in Tipping (1979, p. 185), shows the grouping of Aboriginal languages in the area traversed by the Victorian Exploring Expedition from the Murray River as far as the Cooper. The languages belong to five different subgroups of Australian Aboriginal languages, namely the Paakantyi, Karnic, Yarli, Murray River languages and Kulin languages.

### *Paakantyi (P)*

This refers to the languages of the Darling River area. *Paaka* is the word for 'river' (the Darling) and *-ntyi* means 'belonging to'. At least two Paakantyi-type languages were

in the path of the expedition: Southern Paakantyi at Menindee and Pantyikali (also called Wanyiwalku) in the ranges.

### *Karnic (K)*

This is a large loose-knit subgroup occupying much of the southern part of the Lake Eyre Basin. The two Karnic languages involved, Wangkumara and Yandruwandha, were spoken on the Cooper. There is some doubt as to the affiliation of Karlali, once spoken on the Bulloo River. Some would consider it to be part of the Karnic subgroup, while others regard it as separate (see Breen 2007, 2011; Bowern 2001).

### *Yarli (Y)*

This subgroup was small and close-knit. The only contact the expedition had with speakers from this subgroup was with the

Malyangapa from around Torowoto. The name *Malya-ngapa* means ‘clay-water’ and refers to the fact that the people occupied the area in the far west of New South Wales and adjacent South Australia where there are many large and small claypans, such as Lake Gnurntah (Cobham Lake West) and Lake Boolka, and some with undeservedly derogatory European names such as Lake Muck, Poverty Lake and Starvation Lake.

### *Murray River languages (M)*

Speakers of Murray River languages occupied interrupted areas along the river and to the north. The speakers of Yitha-Yitha were on the path of the expedition. The name of this language, like that of others along the Murray, means ‘No-No’. Many of the languages of Victoria and adjacent areas of New South Wales incorporate the negative word in the language name, either reduplicated, as in Wemba-Wemba, or in combination with a word meaning ‘language’, as in Woiwurrung from the Melbourne area, literally ‘woi’ (= no) language. The use of a reduplicated negative as a language name is found along most of the length of the Murray River as far as the Mildura area. Many of the languages that show this feature are from the Western Kulin group, but this feature is also found in languages not closely related such as Yitha-Yitha: it has become an areal rather than a genetic feature.

### *Kulin languages (Ku)*

The expedition travelled through Kulin country all the way from Melbourne, through country that had been occupied by Europeans for some time. The speakers of Mathi-Mathi, however, occupied country that had not been affected to the same degree. They belonged to the north-western part of Kulin and the name of their language meant ‘No-No’.

## Language descriptions

There are some excellent descriptions of Aboriginal languages dating from the 19th

century, such as the work of Teichelmann and Schürmann (1840) on the Adelaide language and Schürmann’s (1844) work on Parnkalla, but there is nothing of the kind for the ‘expedition languages’ listed above: there are only scattered vocabularies. The only fuller descriptions date from the second half of the 20th century and later: Mathi-Mathi (Hercus 1989; Blake *et al.* 2011), Paakantyi (Hercus 1982, 1994) and for Yandruwandha a detailed grammar, dictionary and texts (Breen 2004 a,b). For the Yarli languages we have only a rough sketch (Hercus and Austin 2004) and for the Murray River languages an unpublished MA thesis (Horgen 2004).<sup>1</sup> The fact that practically all this work is relatively recent means that the editors, such as Tipping (1979) and Jeffries (see Beckler 1993), of some of the expedition records have on the whole found it difficult to do justice to the linguistic angle. In trying to give some background, Tipping and Jeffries used Tindale’s (1974) map, which was not really meant for such detail, and this led to misunderstandings. Some explanations given in these otherwise excellent editions are at

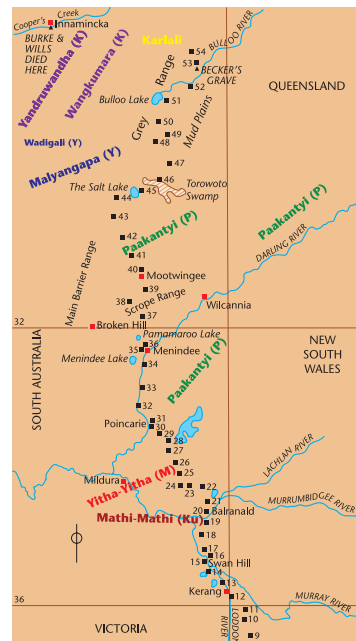


Figure 6.1: Language areas along the path of the expedition.

variance with what is known from linguistic and anthropological evidence. The chapter discusses instances of this; the final section provides additional linguistic information and shows the traditional links between Paakantyi country and the Bulloo.

## Muthi-Muthi

Tipping (1979, p. 58) wrote of Becker's beautiful drawing 'Women in mourning' (see Figure 6.2) that 'These belong to the Muthimuthi tribe'. But there is no mention of 'Muthimuthi' (Mathi-Mathi) in the information from Becker and it is highly unlikely that the women were Mathi-Mathi. The identification appears to have been made purely from looking at Tindale's (1974) map.

Mathi-Mathi is a language of the Victorian Kulin subgroup. It has some special characteristics, including the following: it does not have monosyllabic words; like most Aboriginal languages it does not have initial *r* nor words beginning with a cluster

containing *r*, such as *pr*, *kr* and *tr*;<sup>2</sup> and the majority of nouns end with a suffix *-i*, *-ngi*, for instance the surviving place-name in Mathi-Mathi country south of the expedition route, 'Koorakee' (*kuraki* = sand).

We have only limited data on the neighbouring language, Yitha-Yitha, which belongs to the Murray River languages but can see, even at a glance, that it is very different: it has many monosyllabic words; it has words beginning with *r* and with plosive *+r*, and it has a preference for final consonants.

On 19 September 1860 Becker travelled through *Tinn*, which his notes described as 'probably a native name, meaning unknown' (see Figure 6.3). *Tin* is a Yitha-Yitha word meaning 'foot'. As it is a monosyllable<sup>3</sup> this name cannot be Mathi-Mathi, so it seems that Becker was at this stage in Yitha-Yitha country. Becker further said, 'The place we camped for the night is an outstation of Mr Ross and called Terickenkom (a native name,



Figure 6.2: 'Women in mourning. Sep. 20 60 L. Becker'. Ludwig Becker. Watercolour with pen and ink. Ludwig Becker Sketchbook. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.



Figure 6.3: 'Sketch of route from Balranald to Scot's station, roughly drawn by dead reckoning, 26 Sep. 60'. Ludwig Becker. Watercolour, pen and ink. Ludwig Becker Sketchbook. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

signifying a fish of the bream kind – according to the natives)’ (Tipping 1979, p. 198).

Tipping’s note gives variant spellings of this name, and adds ‘meaning unknown’. This detracts from the linguistic value of Becker’s statement. Why not believe Becker and the ‘natives’ who gave him the information?

Becker describes the country as follows:

*The whole country a sandy loam, the greater part covered with Casuarina, Mallee Pine, stunted Eucalypti etc; patches of good feeding-ground every where, and large plains with grass, salt-bush, porcupine grass, etc; do not indicate the absence of water.*

At Terickenkom (Neumayer’s Tjerrikenkom) Becker saw women whose faces were painted white, and this gave rise to his beautiful sketch. Some 8 miles from Terickenkom were the *Prangal* (Prungle) Hills. This name clearly cannot be Mathi-Mathi as it begins with *pr-*: it is a typical Yitha-Yitha name. A few hours later, Neumayer collected the one and only vocabulary obtained by the expedition:

*I was very much pleased by some of the Blacks showing considerable intelligence while explaining to me their way of living and giving me an idea of their language.*

*The following are a few specimens of words: - star, tingi; sun, nong; moon, bait; cloud, nun, spango; sky, terail; fire, arreng; tree, mann; cart, caruing; white fellow, weifellow, lang; hair, trad; throat, nei; nose, cap; eye, laong; leg, capul; grass, dellum; salt-bush, dolra; night, ran; day, nung (Neumayer 1869, p. 12).*

Table 6.1 shows that Neumayer’s vocabulary belongs to a Murray River language and fits in with Yitha-Yitha. Cognates are found in the language of the neighbouring Murray River people (Hercus 1989), but this revision contains additional material.

With the exception of *terail* for ‘sky’ (Mathi-Mathi *tirili*), none of the words in Neumayer’s list bear the slightest resemblance to Mathi-Mathi words. The

people near Prungle were speaking Yitha-Yitha, a Murray-River-type language. As the language spoken in their vicinity was Yitha-Yitha, and the place-names in the area were compatible with and some even interpretable as Yitha-Yitha, Becker’s women in mourning must have been Yitha-Yitha.

## Whitepeeper

Yitha-Yitha people were obviously helpful to the expedition and made a deep impression not only on Neumayer but also on Becker, who drew a beautiful sketch of an old man who acted as guide. He was named ‘Watpipa the “Old man”’ (Tipping 1979, p. 61) by Becker and ‘Whitepeeper or the “old man”’ (Tipping 1979, p. 199) (see Figure 6.4).

These statements show that the name ‘Whitepeeper’ must have actually meant ‘old man’. As described in Hercus (1989), the Yitha-yitha word given by Macdonald (1886) for ‘old man’ is ‘beak’ and in the vocabulary of the closely related Kemendok/Keramin language from Mallee Cliffs, given to Curr by McFarlane (1886, p. 282) we find the following:

*An old man pikwaar*

*An old woman pik-korump*

*A white man thow-wur*

Here we have ‘pik’ (the same as ‘beak’ on Macdonald’s list), which means ‘old’. To this can be added either ‘korump’ which means ‘(older) woman’ (cf. Yitha-Yitha ‘koram-koram’= old woman), or ‘waar’ which refers to ‘man’, though it is not the ordinary word given for ‘man’. As most Aboriginal languages have a number of words for ‘man’ according to age and status, this is not surprising. ‘Waar’ (which is probably also found in ‘thow-wur’ = white man) must be parallel to ‘korump’ and mean ‘an older man’. We can therefore analyse ‘Watpipa’ or ‘Whitepeeper’ as ‘a really old man’:

*war-pik-war*

*old old man old*



**Table 6.1: Comparative table of Neumayer's word-list**

English	Neumayer (1869)	Yitha-Yitha Primary sources: Cameron (1884) Macdonald (1886) Beveridge (1878)	Yerri-Yerri and Keramin Primary sources: McFarlane (1886) Jamieson (1878)	Ladji-Ladji and Dadi-Dadi Annie Raqon from Euston O'Brian of Ki (Thomas papers, vol. 21)
star	tingi	dingi	dingee	tingee (Annie)
sun	nong	nunk	nung, nunk (Jamieson)	nonge (Annie) nung (O'Brian)
moon	bait	bite (Beveridge) bajjdh (Macdonald)	pyte (Jamieson) baitch (McFarlane)	
cloud	nun, spango	wango = sky	wango = sky	nune (Annie) nyn (O'Brian)
sky	terail	teriel	nurnt = sky (Jamieson)	
fire	arrenc	ngaroong	arronge	narunge (Annie)
tree	mann			
hair	trad	derrart (Macdonald) dreut (Beveridge)	drird kich (McFarlane)	
throat	nei	neit = chin mit = chin (Cameron)		meet = chin (O'Brian)
nose	kap	kaap	cup, kaap (McFarlane)	kup (Annie)
eye	laong	laon, lank langur (Beveridge)		langer (Annie)
leg	kapul	kuppul = thigh	cuppum	kuppul (Annie)
grass	dellum	thelim	thellum (McFarlane)	
night	ran	roin	wango-ran sky- dark (McFarlane)	
day	nung	nunk	nung	nyter-nung (O'Brian) = tomorrow

It is not uncommon for European transcriptions to use -t- instead of -r-, for instance 'moatpu' for *muurpa* = child in early transcriptions of Paakantyi. So 'Warpikwar'–

'Whitepeeper' was Yitha-Yitha and so were the 'natives of the district' referred to by Becker: both he and Neumayer were obviously impressed by them.



Figure 6.4: 'Watpipa the "Old Man", our guide on Sep. 24. 60. L. Becker'. Ludwig Becker. Watercolour, pen and ink. Ludwig Becker Sketchbook. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

## Duroado/Torowoto

### *The two moieties, Kilpara and Makwara*

Beckler (1993, p. 129) wrote, 'The natives of Duroadoo belonged to two different tribes, calling themselves Macquarra and Killparra' and 'Members of the two tribes always live together both in Duroadoo and in Bulla. In each region they have the same names.' An explanatory note by the editor makes the astonishing statement that 'The names given by Beckler – Macquarra and Killparra – do not seem to be recorded elsewhere' (Jeffries in Beckler 1993, p. 191). It seems that the editor had searched lists of tribal names – but Kilpara and Makwara are not names of tribes, they are the names of the two matrilineal moieties. All the people along the Darling from Bourke to Wentworth and along the Murray from Wentworth to Euston were divided into these two moieties.

These two names are very well-known in anthropological literature, particularly from the work of Howitt (1904).

### *Whose country was Duroadoo/Torowoto?*

About Torowoto, Tipping (1979, p. 176) wrote that 'This is the tribal area of the Wanjiwalku people'. This is not strictly correct: the 'natives' of Duroadoo actually did belong to two different tribes, not just to the two different moieties like everybody else in far western New South Wales. The pastoralist James A. Reid (1886, p. 180) contributed a vocabulary from 'Torowotto' to Curr's work. Reid stated that the people there were called 'Milya-uppa' (Malyangapa), but the vocabulary he gave is entirely in Paakantyi. Torowoto Swamp was a favoured area and it seems that it was shared between the Malyangapa people who spoke a language of the Yarli subgroup, and the Paakantyi people

called Wanyiwalku/Pantiykali. That is, they spoke languages belonging to two different subgroups of Australian languages, Yarli and Paakantyi. The situation had existed for some time and the local people were generally bilingual – this led to the misconception that the two languages were the same (Tindale 1974, p. 200).

This bilingualism continued into modern times, as shown by the last full speakers from the general area. These included George Dutton, to whom we owe most of what is known of the local traditions. In 1939 he was Tindale's main informant on the 'Corner Country'. Tindale filled a school notebook with information from George Dutton on 'Wanjiwalku'. George Dutton, as a very old man, worked with Jeremy Beckett in 1957–58 speaking of traditional matters, and with Luise Hercus on a few occasions in 1965–67, recording some of the Wanyiwalku/Pantiykali language as well as Malyangapa.

### Thurru-kartu 'Snake's windbreak', Torowoto Swamp: a Malyangapa name

These large ephemeral wetlands belong to the myth of the Two Ancestral *Ngatyi* Rainbow Serpents, who travelled from near Wanaaring to the Flinders Ranges and back,

naming the country. Their story was told both by George Dutton and by Alf Barlow to Jeremy Beckett (Beckett and Hercus 2009, p. 46): 'They seen a snake there. And he (the male *Ngatyi*) said, "Oh we'll call it the snake break, *thurru-kartu*". *Thurru* means 'snake' in both Malyangapa and Paakantyi; *kartu* means 'windbreak' in Malyangapa but not in Paakantyi. In compound nouns the initial consonant of the second member of the compound is often lenited or lost and so the name was pronounced 'thurru-artu'. This name is only analysable as Malyangapa – the Paakantyi word for 'windbreak' is *nhantu*.

Laurie Quayle, who could recall some of the Malyangapa language in 1974,<sup>6</sup> remembered the story that the many water-channels in the swamp were made by the *Ngatyi* as they travelled through there. The combined evidence of Reid in 1886 and the old people who survived into the 1960s and 1970s means there is little doubt that 'the natives of Duroadoo' did indeed belong to two different tribes, that they were not all Wanyiwalku. This was also pointed out by Allen (2011, p. 248). It is a pity that Becker's and Beckler's spelling 'Duroadoo' did not survive (see Figure 6.5): it is much closer to the Malyangapa pronunciation than the spelling Torowoto which prevailed.



Figure 6.5: 'Preliminary sketch for Arrival of party at Duroadoo. L Becker'. 1861? Pencil. Ludwig Becker Sketchbook. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

## Links to the Bulloo

The Mura stories, the stories of the Ancestors who created the landscape, provided strong cultural links between people far apart. The associated songs and ceremonies were shared all through the areas where the Mura travelled. Beckett recorded a number of Mura stories from western New South Wales in 1957–58 (Beckett ms). These included not only the long story of the two *Ngatyi*, the Rainbow Serpents (Beckett and Hercus 2009), but also the Echidna, the Bronzewing Pigeon and others. The tales of the Ancestors' travel allowed people to know about other people's country. They participated in joint ceremonies, which meant travelling into other people's country, and some also learnt to communicate in languages other than their own. Allen recalled Howitt's account of how an old man, probably Yandruwandha, 'was able to recite the names of waterholes between the Cooper, Bulloo and Wonnaminta, pointing out these localities on a mud map drawn by Howitt' (Allen 2011, p. 250).

### Some place-names in the ranges

On their travels through the ranges the expedition came to a number of places important in traditions, and some of the names involved are analysable. The name of the Wonnaminta Creek (Beckler's 'Wonamente'), which is in the north-westernmost part of the ranges, is Malyangapa. This language has a suffix *-mintha* (transcribed as '-minta' in the two place-names). This suffix does not seem to change the meaning of a noun: it may be just slightly emphatic. A well-attested example of its use is in the word for 'head'. *Kaka* is a widespread word for 'head': in Malyangapa the word is *kaka-mintha*. This feature is entirely Malyangapa and does not appear to be shared even by the other two Yarli languages. The two place-names involved are *Yandaminta* in the Corner Country, near Yandama. This name is analysable as *yarnta* = stone + *mintha*. The Yandaminta Creek is situated in an area where there

are many Aboriginal stone-quarries, and Dutton emphasised to Tindale that the high hills were a good place for getting 'flint' (Tindale notebook, p. 53). The second is Wonnaminta, *Wanaminta* probably was *wana* = boomerang + *mintha*. It appears to have been near the southern edge of Malyangapa country. Further south there are two places on the route of the expedition, with easily recognisable Paakantyi names. They are *Kukirka*, which means 'black' (Wills wrote it as *Kokriega* and Beckler as *Gogirga*), in Scropes Range, and *Paatyirka*, which means 'white' (Wills' *Botoja* and Beckler's *Bodurga*).

The Mootwingee area was of particular importance to Aboriginal people and, as Tipping pointed out, the now-famous rock engravings were 'not sighted by members of the Burke and Wills expedition. If they were, Expedition members appear to have made no reference to them' (see Figure 6.6). The name Mootwingee, now written as 'Mutawintji' in the name of the national park, is from *muthu* = grass and *wintyi* = green, fresh. All the place-names in the area are Paakantyi. George Dutton told Tindale a long myth in Wanyiwalku/Pantyikali that included direct reference to sites (Beckett et al. 2008). His story of 'The Moon and his nephew' belongs to sites on Mootwingee.

### The Kangaroo and the Euro

In 1958 George Dutton related the story 'The Kangaroo and the Euro' to Beckett in English, with the direct speech sections in Wanyiwalku/Pantyikali, Wangkumara and the Pityara dialect of Karlali, according to location. This myth has wider implications: it relates to the creation and naming of the country between the ranges and the Bulloo.

In this story the Kangaroo and the Euro lived around Noonthorangee. Their friendship came to an end when they had a dispute about yams *nhanthura*, hence the name of the place *Nhanturanyi* (belonging to yams) – the suffix *-ntyi* (belonging to) is found in all Paakantyi dialects. They travelled northwards via Koonenberry Hill (which



represents the Kangaroo). They continued their dispute, exchanging the equivalent of four-letter words in Wanyiwalku/Pantiykali, until they got to *Mintiwada* (Peak Hill) near Milparinka, where they began to talk in Wangkumara. The Kangaroo hopped towards the east, and from then on his track was near that of the expedition party. 'Then he went to Caryapundy waterhole and from there to Djaudjaururu waterhole' (on modern maps this is Chow Chowra, very close to Wompah Gate on the Queensland border). And 'he stood two orange trees up there'. He said (in Beckett's transcription): '*dundalungal* – you can grow there'.<sup>7</sup> Here the Kangaroo is still speaking Wangkumara. On his way further north he speaks in Pityara, the southern dialect of Karlali, and finishes in a cave 'in Bulloo Downs country' saying in Pityara 'This is my country here, I'll stay here.' Despite the terrible deprivations that Beckler's party went through, they certainly realised that the people on the Bulloo were

'different from the natives of the Darling or at Duroadoo' and spoke a different language.

### *Dēlākā*

The story of the Kangaroo is not the only myth that links Bulloo country with Paakantyi country: the important story of *Thintili*, the Echidna, recorded by Beckett (Beckett ms), which is connected with initiation, provides a similar link. It seems likely therefore that people from the lower Bulloo would have been to joint ceremonies with Wanyiwalku people and would have had some knowledge of a Paakantyi language. So the people at Korliatto Creek (Beckler 1993, p. 154), desperate to get rid of the European visitors, might have tried to communicate with them in Paakantyi – particularly as they may have gathered that Stone knew some Paakantyi.

All the languages in this area, including Paakantyi, have a stress accent on the first syllable of all simple words. However, if a



Figure 6.6: 'Small cavity in Mutwanji Gorge with native drawings and impressions'. Ludwig Becker. [1861.] The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486. (Note: this is in fact in the Scropes Range, closer to Menindee.)



word is pronounced with strong emphasis, as when calling someone, the stress shifts to the last syllable. When the emphasis is meant to be even greater or if someone is trying to communicate with a deaf person and 'spelling out' a word of three syllables the second (usually unaccented) syllable is also accented, and in Paakantyi is accompanied by a rise in pitch. The first syllable is unstressed and the vowel is reduced to a weak neutral vowel, a shwa, which would be represented in transcription by a brief 'ë' as in Beckler's spelling. So whatever else we might postulate, whichever language from the area that people had been speaking, the accentuation implied in Beckler's spelling shows that this word was pronounced not in the normal fashion, but with great emphasis. We might suspect that the people were wanting to say 'go away!' but there does not seem to be anything in Karlali or Wangkumara resembling 'dëlākā' that would convey such a meaning. One proposition is that the people at Korliatto Creek might have been attempting to communicate by means of Paakantyi and were uttering the Paakantyi word *thulaka* (bad), which would correspond to Beckler's 'dëlākā' when pronounced with emphasis (half-questioningly, we are told) like 'Is it bad that way?'. They would have been dismayed when Beckler repeated the word to them with similar emphasis. Sadly, no one can tell us now whether this explanation is totally wrong.

## Endnotes

- 1 Michael Horgen has been very generous in making this available in electronic form to interested people.
- 2 Aboriginal languages in this area, as in most of Australia, do not distinguish between voiced and unvoiced consonants so it makes no difference whether we write 't' or 'd', 'p' or 'b', 'k' or 'g'.
- 3 Neumayer (1869, p. 14) listed another place with a monosyllabic name – *Gunn* – in the immediate vicinity of Tjerrikenkom on his return journey. Like Tjerrikenkom, this name has not survived on modern maps. The name *Tin* survives in Lake Tin Tin.
- 4 A site called 'Cabul' Gowall was close to the Prungle Hills and was the next camping place for Neumayer (1869, p. 4). The presence of two place-names referring to body parts – *Tin* =foot and *Kapul* = thigh – means that the names may be associated with an ancestral myth, now long forgotten.
- 5 No word similar to Neumayer's word for 'throat' has been found in any of the Murray River languages. As communication was probably partly by pointing (cf. the confusion between 'sky' and 'cloud') it is possible that the word for 'chin' is involved. I found a form *neit* = chin in Howitt's correspondence with A.L.P. Cameron.
- 6 Hercus tapes 502–4, held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
- 7 It is in fact in this general area that Beckler witnessed how the camels destroyed 'a pretty little Capparis tree, a curiosity here on the creek during our journey only four examples having been found' (Beckler 1993, p. 150).

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# Burke and Wills and the Aboriginal people of the Corner Country

*Harry Allen*



## Introduction

The history of the Aboriginal peoples of the Corner Country – Paakantyi, Danggali, Wilyali, Bandjigali, Malyangapa, Wadikali, Yardliyawara, Wangkangurru, Wangkumara, Yarluyandi, Garlali, Yandruwandha, Yawarrawarrka and Diyari – began thousands of years before the Burke and Wills expedition. Within that history, the expedition was but a moment in time. The arrival of the explorers in the Corner Country, however, marked the beginnings of relations between European Australians and Aboriginal people and the beginning of relations between the Europeans and the land. While the Victorian Exploring Expedition aimed to be the first to cross the Australian continent from its southern to its northern shore, its secondary purpose was to assess the land and its inhabitants for their

usefulness for settlement. As a result, the story of Burke and Wills runs like a thread through the subsequent history of European–Aboriginal relations in the Corner Country, sometimes on the surface but at other times buried in the land itself.

The Burke and Wills expedition started from Melbourne on 20 August 1860 and, as Bonyhady (1991, 2002) pointed out, from there it journeyed into the symbolic mythology of European colonisation of Australia. As myth, the Burke and Wills story transcends the past, present and the future, being continuously reinterpreted through the lens of our contemporary concerns. The story of Aboriginal people and their interaction with the Burke and Wills expedition has become a shadowy part of this grand narrative, hidden within ‘The Great Australian Silence’ (Stanner 1979, pp. 207–218).



Kurtzer (2003) drew attention to the difficulties involved in finding an Aboriginal voice even when both speakers and listeners are Aboriginal. Ultimately the Aboriginal story can only be told by Aboriginal people themselves. Instead, this chapter is a story of Aboriginal Australians and their interaction with European Australians assembled from many sources – European observations, artefacts and other physical traces – and the history of the region and its Aboriginal inhabitants documented by missionaries, policemen, welfare officers, anthropologists and station owners.

The ‘Corner Country’ describes the area where the state boundaries of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory intersect. The geographic referents used by metropolitan Australians for the Corner Country relate to distance and isolation, being variously described as beyond the black stump, the back o’ Bourke or even the dead heart of Australia (Gregory 1906). Contemporary conceptions of this region shift uneasily between its reality and our imagination of it. As with the Burke and Wills expedition itself, the various elements that make up this area – Lake Eyre, the Simpson Desert, the Channel Country, Sturt’s Stony Desert, the Cooper and the Birdsville Track – represent archetypes of danger and foreboding in the Australian psyche.

Aboriginal people also represent volatile elements in the European imagination, being mentally and physically located beyond the limits of civil society. To a large extent, they have also been placed outside contemporary time, where distance from the metropolitan centres of culture has been read, in the case of the Aborigines, as distance from modernity (Fabian 1983; Gamble 1992).

One source of difficulty in this story is the assumption that Aboriginal society was inherently fragile, where the arrival of a single visitor from another world might precipitate the collapse of Aboriginal belief and understanding (Gamble 1992; Schrire 1984, p. 67). Such a view was put forward in

the 1960s by Ronald and Catherine Berndt, who argued that:

*The coming of the Europeans altered the traditional picture drastically, in almost every respect, until today no Aboriginal society has been able to maintain its former integrity and independence ... The reason for their rapid disintegration and relatively easy collapse are to be found not only in the nature of the contact itself ... [but] are to be sought, as well, in the structure and organization of Aboriginal social life and belief, with its heavy emphasis on non-change ... The impact of the outside world came as a rude shock (Berndt and Berndt 1964, pp. 421–422).*

Aboriginal people living in the areas traversed by the explorers were at home. They were surrounded by kin and possessed intellectual tools capable of explaining the presence of strange humans and animals. The geographical and mythological territory they inhabited was familiar to them. It was the Europeans who were out of place, anxious, aggressive, bristling with arms and ready to use them.

Neither the explorers nor the Aborigines lived in a vacuum prior to the arrival of Burke’s party at the Cooper. Aboriginal people living there had contact with other tribes who had experience of explorers and pastoralists and therefore were not entirely ignorant of the Europeans (Hardy 1969, p. 65–74). To this historical knowledge might be added Aboriginal cultural mechanisms for dealing with strange events (cf. Povinelli 1995). The expedition itself did not enter Aboriginal lands *de novo*; there had been 70 years of colonial exploration and experience in dealing with Aboriginal people. What is remarkable is how little of that experience the explorers appear to have drawn on, with disastrous results (Allen 2011; Bonyhady 1991, p. 311).

Berndt and Berndt (1964, p. 423) suggested that Aboriginal people acted in the expectation that they would receive the same treatment which they gave, or would

have given, if in similar circumstances as the explorers. It is no accident that initial Aboriginal reactions to the presence of the Europeans were relatively peaceful; serious conflict was precipitated only when European intentions became clear and unavoidable (Jenkin 1979, pp. 37, 69).

## Aboriginal groups in the Corner Country

Aboriginal social entities over this broad area comprise a number of linguistic groups. The area along the Darling River and to its west is made up of Paakantyi speakers – Danggali, Wilyali and Bandjigali. To the north-west of these are groups speaking Yarli languages, made up of the Malyangapa, Wadikali and Yardliyawara. Further to the north and west are groups speaking Karnic and Proto-Karnic languages – Wangkangurru, Wangkumara, Yarluyandi, Garlali, Yandruwandha,

Yawarrawarrka and Diyari (Allen 2011; Austin 1990b; Bovern 2009; Hercus 1982; Hercus and Austin 2004; see Figure 7.1). These groups shared cultural characteristics with their neighbours and were conversant with each other's languages. Paakantyi speakers, together with the neighbouring Yarli- and Karnic-speaking peoples, possessed matrilineal clan systems, exogamous matrilinities, initiations involving tooth avulsion and ritual scarification, and, finally, mourning customs involving the wearing of white clay. Karnic speakers also shared many features of ritual and mythological knowledge with Western Desert language speakers located in the desert country further to the north and west, such as the Arabana, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Luritja, including the rite of circumcision (Beckett, in Hercus and Austin 2004, p. 232; Beckett and Hercus 2009, p. 47; Hercus 1982, p. 3).

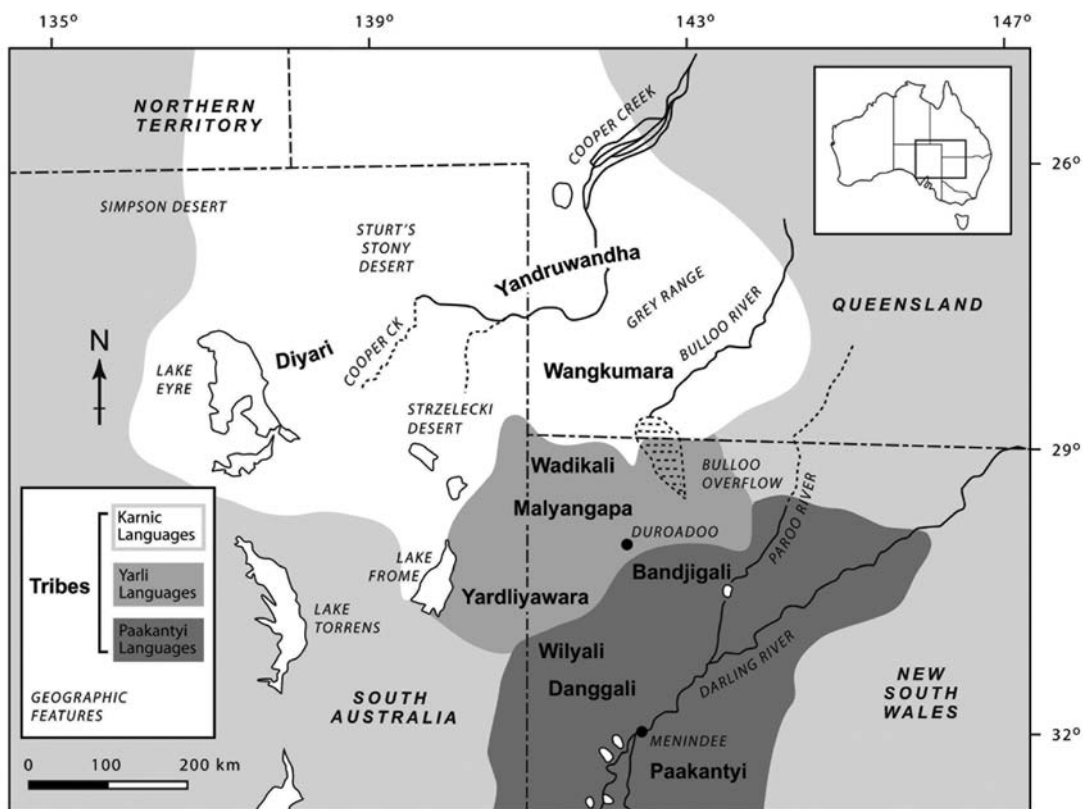


Figure 7.1: Aboriginal language groups in the Corner Country.

The Corner Country consists of desert of various types interspersed with rocky ranges, salt creeks, springs and ephemeral rivers and lakes. As an environment it can be described as having periods of boom and of bust. Booms are marked by good summer rains and/or floods down the major rivers, the latter occasionally of such magnitude as to fill Lake Eyre. Busts are periods of drought, when neither rain nor floods occur (Balcombe and Arthington 2009; Capon 2003). All populations in this region have had to develop strategies that will enable them to survive such challenging conditions.

Despite its forbidding appearance, early European observers noted that large numbers of Aboriginal people lived in the region, particular in the northern Lakes area of South Australia and near the Cooper (Allen 2011, pp. 250–252; Sturt 1849, vol. 2, p. 75). From our sedentary perspective, given such dry country, the Aboriginal ability to combine a highly mobile and portable culture while maintaining social networks and boundaries is hard to grasp (Sutton 1995).

At least part of the explanation for this Aboriginal ability lies in the network of cross-cutting relationships which existed between the Aboriginal people living in this area and those in adjacent and more distant areas. This network manifested in trading relations across the Lake Eyre Basin. It involved large quantities of ochre from the mines at Parachilna (Jones 1984), of the endemic nicotine source, pitjuri (*Duboisia hopwoodii*) (Watson 1983), of fine sandstones for use as grindstones (Smith *et al.* 2010), of axes from central Queensland (Tibbett 2002) and, finally, of intangible goods, stories, songs and dances (Hercus 1980; McBryde 1997; Mulvaney 1976) which were moved across the entire region. McBryde (1997) documented the totality of such trading networks in the Lake Eyre Basin, noting:

*The major features of this exchange system are its extent and the range of goods (of utilitarian and symbolic values) in constant movement along its lines of*

*travel. No major monuments mark this route, though there are important, and large archaeological assemblages marking the traditional meeting and ceremonial places at which exchanges took place ... There are also extensive quarry sites, sources of material for hatchet heads, grindstones and ochre. Many of these are celebrated in creation or other stories; they are places of power and spiritual significance (McBryde 1997, p. 7).*

## Historical interactions between Aboriginal and European peoples in the Corner Country

Paakantyi-speaking peoples living along the Darling River and at its junction with the Murray had early and intense interactions with Europeans. Sturt reached the upper Darling River in 1828–29. In his subsequent explorations of the Murray River, he clashed with Aboriginal people near its junction with the Darling. In 1835, Mitchell clashed with Aboriginal people just south of Menindee and clashed again in 1836, when exploring the Murray River near the Darling junction (Mitchell 1839, vol. 1, pp. 272–273, vol. 2, pp. 94–98). Mitchell considered the Darling River Aborigines to be particularly aggressive, in contrast to those he found elsewhere along the Murray (Baker 1997). Subsequent Aboriginal testimony, however, suggests that the attack on Mitchell was payback for the death of an Aboriginal woman caused by one of Mitchell's men (Brock 1988, p. 37). From 1838, stockmen, including Hawdon, Bonney, Sturt and Eyre, overlanded cattle and sheep to South Australia via the Murray River. However, it was not until 1841 that a series of major clashes between large groups of Aboriginal men and the overlanders occurred. These culminated in the Rufus River Massacre when an estimated 30–40 Aboriginal men were killed (Eyre 1984; South Australian Government 2012). Eyre's appointment as a Protector of Aborigines in South Australia

and his settlement at Moorundie, on the Murray, was a response to the severity of these clashes (Cliff 1980; Eyre 1985). Eyre subsequently explored the country from the Flinders Ranges to Lake Frome. The few contacts he had were probably with Adnyamathanha Aboriginal people living there (Eyre 1845; Simpson and Hercus 2004).

Sturt visited Eyre at Moorundie on his way to begin his Central Australian explorations from Menindee (Sturt 1849, p. 25). Sturt's expedition was a truly extraordinary affair, consisting at its start of 15 men, 11 horses, 30 bullocks, 200 sheep, six dogs and a succession of Aboriginal guides (Brock 1988, p. 46). The considerable number of men and animals made Sturt and his party unwelcome guests at the water holes they visited (Sturt 1849, vol. 1, p. 358). Sturt's camp at Depot Glen for seven months prevented Aboriginal residents from using of one of the few large water holes available to them. Sturt also made use of deep wells Aboriginal people had dug (Sturt 1984, p. 70). These actions represented more than an inconvenience in an area where access to water could mean the difference between life and death (Sturt 1849, vol. 1, p. 306, 1984, p. 77). While there were minor occasions of conflict, Sturt nevertheless reported that Aboriginal people 'so far from exhibiting any unkind feeling, treated us with genuine hospitality ... These were a merry people and seemed highly delighted at our visit, and if one or two of them were a little forward, I laid it to the account of curiosity' (Sturt 1849, Vol. 2, pp. 74, 78).

Sturt's observation raises the question of how the Aboriginal people might have regarded the strangers. Berndt and Berndt (1964, p. 422) argued that Aboriginal people commonly considered the first Europeans they met as returning spirits of the dead, presumably on account of the white skin colour. There are instances of Aboriginal behaviour towards explorers which suggest this might have been the case. Sturt recorded occasions when Aboriginal people burst into

tears and wept when they first encountered the explorers (Sturt 1849, vol. 2, pp. 68, 72). This might have been from fear or as mourning for the returned dead. Brock (1988, p. 135) noted that Aboriginal people reacted with horror when he raised his trouser leg to reveal a pale skeletal leg. Elsewhere he commented, 'The most unquestionable evidence is here given that we are looked upon as beings from another world by these children of the wastes' (Brock 1988, p. 109).

On other occasions, Aboriginal people reacted to the European presence with confidence and an apparent lack of concern (Sturt 1849, vol. 1, p. 314, vol. 2, p. 74). Certainly attempts were made to include the explorers within the Aboriginal circle by offering them hospitality and sexual comforts (Brock 1988, pp. 135–136; Sturt 1849, vol. 1, p. 296, vol. 2, p. 74, 1984, p. 67).

Stevens (1994, p. 41) noted that Diyari women might be used as mediators in situations where conflict was possible, signalling the Diyari's intention not to fight. Offering women was a gesture of conciliation, and a rebuttal might be taken as an indication of hostility on the part of the strangers. Sturt appears to have avoided conflict in these situations by reacting to such invitations in a humane fashion, noting, 'I have even made allowances for human timidity, and respected the customs and prejudices of the rudest people' (Sturt 1849, vol. 2, p. 87).

Sturt was restricted to an outside view of Aboriginal life. Although he had Aboriginal guides, they were not from the country he was travelling through. Communication was largely through signing (Brock 1988, pp. 85, 110, 148). Sturt noted divisions between Aboriginal groups through language differences, particularly whether a language spoken was related to that of the 'river tribes' (Paakantyi). He was aware that there was a language boundary near Depot Glen as people there shared vocabulary with the Darling River people (Sturt 1849, vol. 1, pp. 284, 296). He also observed differences

in the physical evidence of initiation rituals shown on the naked bodies of Aboriginal people, noting whether men had their front teeth or had lost them, whether they were circumcised and whether they had raised scars across their chests (1849, vol. 1, pp. 209, 284, 297, 314, 340, 341, 348). On one occasion Sturt observed that the women also had front teeth missing (Sturt 1849, vol. 1, p. 358).

Sturt's 1844–45 expedition to the Cooper and Simpson Desert paralleled the Burke and Wills expedition which travelled over some of the same country 15 years later. Both Sturt and Burke left their main parties and supplies at depots and attempted rapid dashes to gain their objectives; an inland sea in Sturt's case and the northern coast of the continent in Burke's. These journeys exhausted the leaders and their men. All parties suffered from dietary ailments, some to a mortal extent, which might have been avoided by using Aboriginal knowledge of plants, their nutrients and methods of preparation. The superficial observations of Aboriginal life were also similar. Finally, Aboriginal people living along the Cooper appear to have reacted towards both expeditions in broadly similar ways (Allen 2011).

Of the Aborigines, Sturt (1849, vol. 2, p. 74) noted that he and his men were 'wholly in their power'. Similarly, Burke, Wills and King were at the Aborigines' mercy when they returned to the Cooper in a distressed state (Burke and Wills 1861). Rather than being aggressive, both the Yandruwandha, on the Cooper, and the Diyari closer to Lake Eyre were hospitable, shared food and generally attempted to draw the Europeans into a web of relations through invitations of a social or sexual nature.

A major difference between the two expeditions, however, was their respective attitudes towards the Aborigines. Sturt appears to have dealt with invitations in a manner which did not upset the Aboriginal people. This might be contrasted with accounts by Burke and by Wills:

*A large tribe of blacks came pestering us to go to their camp and have a dance which we declined. They were very troublesome, and nothing but the threat to shoot them will keep them away; they are, however, easily frightened, and, although fine looking men, decidedly not of a warlike disposition ... they seldom carry any weapons, except a shield and a large kind of boomerang ... from the little we have seen of them, they appear to be mean-spirited and contemptible in every respect (Wills, Cooper Creek, Sunday 16 December 1860, in Burke and Wills 1861, p. 15).*

Four days later, after the journey to the Gulf had begun, Burke observed further attempts by the Aborigines to extend social relations to include the explorers, noting, 'we found a great many natives. They presented us with fish, and offered their women' (Burke and Wills 1861, p. 32). Shortly afterwards, Burke described the Aborigines as trying to 'bully or bounce us' and noted that they were repulsed. Shortly before he died, Burke acted in an almost irrational manner, attacking Aboriginal men carrying gifts of fish in nets (King's narrative in Burke and Wills 1861). Despite such provocations, the Yandruwandha continued to act in a measured way towards the Europeans (Allen 2011, p. 254).

## Pastoral settlement and the Aboriginal frontier

Through the second half of the 19th century, expansion of pastoral settlement in north-west New South Wales, south-west Queensland and north-east South Australia involved advances and retreats. During good years, especially those with adequate rainfall, high stock prices and readily available labour, pastoral runs were taken up beyond the limits of settlement. Settlement was pulled back during dry years, which coincided with periods of low prices, economic recession and labour



shortages during which costs were driven above the margins of return. In taking up the land for grazing, pastoralists faced the choice of driving Aboriginal people away or accommodating them in the pastoral economy. As will be seen, both strategies were utilised. Initially, however, the taking up of the land provoked Aboriginal action and pastoralist reaction.

A frank account of the economic threat posed by Aboriginal depredations on sheep flocks, and the harsh measures that were taken to counter this threat, was provided by Fred Hayward. Hayward was overseer of Pekina Station from 1847 to 1851, and from then until 1864 was a partner with William James and John Harris Browne in Aroona Station in the Flinders Ranges (Hayward 1928) (John Harris Browne accompanied Sturt in 1844–45: Browne 1966). In Hayward's account, it is necessary to make some allowance for the embellishments for effect made by an old bushman. At one point he declared 'These campaigns against the niggers gave zest to the wild life I led' (1928, p. 89). On the other hand, evidence presented elsewhere, in northern South Australia and south-west Queensland, supports his account as typical of conditions on the margins of settlement through much of the 19th century (Copland *et al.* 2006, pp. 54–78; Rowley 1972; Watson 1998, pp. 96–100).

Hayward stated that the Aboriginal tribes had to be terrified before they would stop their raids on his sheep. Copland *et al.* (2006, p. 46) also documented the use of terror in south-west Queensland as a measure of control. On one occasion, Hayward (1928, p. 130) described giving a native 'two dozen lashes with a stock whip' for stealing a sheep. In retrospect, the punishments appear to be harsh relative to the threat posed by Aboriginal sheep-stealing. Hayward provided a tally of losses at Aroona in 1852. Out of a total of 7738 sheep, 599 were lost. Of the causes which could be ascertained, 290 were killed for rations, 50 died as lambs, 78 were

killed by wild dogs and 92 were stolen by Aboriginal people (Hayward 1928, p. 147).

Given that stations were not fenced until the 1860s, the system of open pastures made isolated shepherds vulnerable to attack (Jeans 1972, Fig. 26). John McKinlay held a neighbouring station for a short period between 1851 and 1855 (Owanegan – now Hannigan's Gap, Flinders Ranges). Hayward commented that two Aboriginal men, who were accused and subsequently acquitted of murder, camped on McKinlay's station and 'speedily received from some unknown hand the penalty due to their misdeeds' (Hayward 1928, pp. 140–142). He noted, 'The season [1854], the natives made a raid on a flock at Aroona and worried the shepherd ... [I contacted the McKinlay Brothers] whom I at once pressed to my assistance to chastise the natives ... we stalked them coming upon them half asleep ... We kept up a running fire on them as they bolted up the Flinders Ranges' (1928, p. 157).

Prior to this, in 1848, John McKinlay had taken up a station near Lake Victoria and a year later he joined a group of settlers heading north up the Darling River (Larcombe 1935, p. 138). McKinlay achieved a reputation on the Darling as a bushman and a 'terror to the blacks', but his land speculations had limited success (Anon. 1939, p. 8). His experiences on the Darling may not have inclined him to benevolence towards the Aborigines. Hardy (1969, p. 68) related that stations on the Darling were abandoned between 1851 and 1855 due to a lack of labour and Aboriginal attacks. She quoted McKinlay as stating that the Aborigines 'came down upon the half-protected stations and livestock of the settlers, committing frightful murders and destroying their flocks and herds to an alarming extent. The blacks in fact took possession of the country, threatening to utterly exterminate the white man, and establish a perfect reign of terror' (McKinlay in Hardy 1969, p. 68).

When McKinlay set out with the South Australian expedition to relieve Burke, he left

from Baker's station at Blanchewater in the northern Flinders Ranges (McKinlay 1863). By 1864, Thomas Elder had established a station at Lake Hope in the far north-east corner of South Australia. Police and telegraph stations were also established at Lake Hope to provide protection from the Diyari Aboriginal people resident there (Stevens 1994, p. 16; South Australian History 2012).

Through time, the low returns from these lands and the scarcity of European labour meant that Aboriginal people were employed as shepherds and station workers. With head stations located at major water holes and shepherds at other water sources, Aboriginal people may have had little option but to attach themselves to the Europeans. The alternative was to suffer depredations of police and pastoralists retaliating for thefts of sheep or attacks on shepherds (Copland *et al.* 2006).

Lands in northern South Australia were held under Crown lease. Between 1851 and 1911, pastoral leases in South Australia required leaseholders to provide for Aboriginal access to camping and hunting grounds and to water (Forster 2000, pp. 19–20, 24). This allowed Aboriginal people to pursue aspects of their traditional lives.

The Jamieson brothers took up stations at Mildura and at Mount Murchison, near Wilcannia, in 1848. They made extensive use of Aboriginal labour but expressed frustration that, during the summer months, the Aboriginal labour force abandoned their employment and followed 'the roving life of naked savages':

*... they do not infrequently during their annual migrations travel over 200 or 300 miles of country, increasing in numbers as they proceed, alternately hunting, fishing, and levying contributions on both sheep and cattle, as they slowly and indolently saunter along the banks of the Murray and Darling. Such is the limited degree of civilization, which even the best of our blacks have reached, that during these migrations we always experience*

*considerable difficulties in retaining out of the whole tribe the necessary numbers for shepherding alone. All the present and future advantages offered [to them] fail to compensate for the disappointment of not being able to join these wild and roving excursions (Hugh Jamieson [1853] in Bride 1983, pp. 379–380).*

Control of the Aboriginal labour force was achieved by allowing families to take up residence on the station, by acting as agents for the distribution of government food rations to the Aborigines and by the provision of police stations capable of dealing with any disturbances. Rowse (1998) documented the use of rations as a means of controlling the Aboriginal labour force, both socially and economically, thus anchoring the Aboriginal population to locations close to the rationing stations. Forster (2000, p. 5, map 3) noted that by 1867 there were more than 58 ration depots in South Australia and by 1884 there were 20 ration stations in the far north (Stevens 1994, p. 106).

Aboriginal men performed tasks as shepherds, fencers, rabbiters, shearers and wool washers, while the women worked as domestics. Forster (2000, pp. 19–21) noted that Aboriginal people on pastoral stations were expected to find some of their food through traditional hunting and fishing activities. This expectation allowed them to move around the countryside to some extent and enabled Aboriginal people to maintain traditional skills, knowledge and ceremonies on their own lands.

While the balance was always in favour of the pastoralists, the relationship between Aboriginal workers and the pastoral stations was also symbiotic, allowing Aboriginal people to maintain a degree of independence. Paterson (2008) discussed the establishment of Strangways Springs Station in Arabana country to the west of Lake Eyre, where the Aboriginal labour force, at least in the early days, was essential for its success.

The second phase of pastoral development occurred between 1882 and

1900 when station owners installed bores and fenced paddocks. This reduced the need for Aboriginal shepherds, though skilled Aboriginal workers, stockmen and shearers continued to be employed (Paterson 2005, pp. 38–39). Ultimately, drought, distance from markets and economic depressions caused the failure of the sheep industry in the far north of South Australia. The area today is marked by deserted homesteads and fences in disrepair (Paterson 2005, p. 44).

## Missions in the Lake Eyre Basin, 1866–1915

Christian missionary activity in the Lake Eyre Basin was initiated five years after the Burke and Wills expedition, partly as a response to the humane care provided by the Yandruwandha to the expedition's sole survivor King (Stevens 1994, pp. 17, 50). Independent missions were set up by Lutherans and Moravians, with both seeking to establish on Cooper Creek. For security reasons, they were persuaded against this and both settled closer to the police station at Lake Hope. In 1866, two missions were established only 16 km apart – Lutherans at Killalpaninna and Moravians at Kopperamanna (Stevens 1994, pp. 52–53). The Moravian mission at Kopperamanna was short-lived, closing in 1868. A police station under command of Samuel Gason was established at Kopperamanna in 1870. Kopperamanna and Boolcaltaninna were subsequently added to the Lutheran lands and worked as outstations.

The cultural distance between the evangelical Lutherans and the Diyari was extreme and misunderstandings occurred soon after the mission was established. Stevens (1994, pp. 41, 52–53, 63) noted that the missionaries were outraged when the Diyari sent Aboriginal women to them and when they invited the missionaries to eat human flesh as a part of a mortuary ritual.

The placing of the mission at a major water hole, the strange behaviour of the missionaries and their attempted

interference with Aboriginal customs resulted in a Diyari plot to kill the missionaries. The Lutherans retired to Boolcaltaninna Station and the Diyari were warned by police trooper Gason about the consequences of direct action.

While sermons, church services and a school marked Killalpaninna as being different from the pastoral stations setting up near the mission, other aspects of the mission closely reflected the colonial economic situation. The mission functioned as a government rationing station, there was a police station nearby and after the drought of 1870–72 mission operations were extended to include sheep grazing. By 1880, mission lands exceeded 734 square miles (190 000 ha), running 5000 sheep, 45 cattle, nine horses and 350 goats, worked by two lay preachers and 45 Aboriginal workers (Stevens 1994, p. 94). Mission payments to Aboriginal workers were irregular. They did not exceed one-third of the wages generally paid to European workers and by 1914 were still less than half the wages paid to Aboriginal workers on surrounding stations (Coghlan 1918, p. 739; Stevens 1994, pp. 136, 188).

Aboriginal people living at Killalpaninna experienced tension between traditional and mission requirements. Ceremonies were held away from the mission and the older men attempted to continue their control of marriage arrangements with younger women. Stevens (1994, pp. 122, 168, 180–184, 238–239) noted difficulties arising between the mission Aborigines and the more traditional Aborigines in station camps. Young men who refused to go through initiation rites, those who revealed secret information to the missionaries and men accused of sorcery, might be killed (Stevens 1994, pp. 122–123; Watson 1998, pp. 53, 64). There were attempts to revive Aboriginal spiritual connection to the land through the Mudlunga ceremony, a millenarian movement which spread from Queensland and was performed close to the mission (Hercus 1980; Kimber

1990; Mulvaney 1976; see Watson 1998, pp. 63–65, for the Kooroongoora, a similar ceremony in south-west Queensland).

The missionaries learnt the Diyari language as part of their work and taught a written form of the language at school (see Ferguson 1987 for a discussion of Diyari literacy). Diyari became a *lingua franca* for all Aboriginal groups at the mission. Despite a facility with the language, some of the missionaries had only a limited understanding of Diyari customs. In 1899 Johannes Flierl commented, ‘These blacks are people who only live for the moment, and have no concept of the past and no concept of hope for the future. There is no trace of a deeper meaning to life, no folk lore, no sages, no remainders of the stories of the past, or ancestors’ (quoted in Stevens 1994, p. 99).

Through time and for a variety of reasons, including violence, sickness and infertility, local Aboriginal populations diminished. By 1900, Aboriginal deaths at the mission exceeded births (Stevens 1994, p. 190). As one group declined, its place was taken by others coming in from the desert. Hercus (1994, p. 19) and Jones (2002, p. 172) documented that Wangkangurru people were the last to come into the mission and as a result were the ones who held most firmly to their traditions. The mission experienced serious problems in the second decade of the 20th century in terms of debt, low returns, drought and falling numbers of Aboriginal people. It is ironic that just as the mission project began to fully transform the lives of the Aboriginal people at Killalpaninna, the mission was closed and the lands passed into private hands (Stevens 1994, pp. 231–238).

## Scientific interest in the peoples of the Lake Eyre Basin

Scientific interest in Aboriginal people as living representatives of primeval human society coincided with the period of massive colonial impacts on their lives (Fison and Howitt 1880; Spencer and Gillen 1899). As a

consequence, information about Australian Aborigines played a significant part in debates about human social evolution. From about 1930 there was the emergence of anthropology as a scientific discipline in Australia, when interest shifted from social evolution to a functional understanding of Aboriginal culture. From 1950, sociological, archaeological and further linguistic studies have taken place.

Alfred William Howitt’s first experience of the Corner Country came in 1859 when he led a group of pastoralist investors through the northern Flinders Ranges (Stanner 1972, pp. 432–435). Through 1861 and 1862, Howitt led three expeditions to the Cooper. The first was a search for Burke and Wills, which ended with the discovery of their graves and the rescue of King – the sole survivor of Burke’s dash to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Howitt later returned to the Cooper with gifts for the Yandruwandha in recognition of their kindness to the explorers. The final expedition, via Blanchewater and Lake Hope, was to recover the bodies of Burke and Wills so that a state funeral could be held in Melbourne (Bonyhady 1991, pp. 234–235).

Howitt’s relations with the Yandruwandha were entirely cordial. However, his overall impression of the Aboriginal people of the Cooper was negative. He opposed further recompense for the kindness extended by the Yandruwandha towards Burke, Wills and King, declaring them to be ‘such an idle, incorrigibly treacherous and lying race, that I am getting into a state of aversion towards them’ (Bonyhady 1991, p. 235; Nobbs 2008, p. 209).

Howitt’s later scientific interest in the Aboriginal people was stimulated by reading works by Darwin, Lubbock and Tylor and through his contact with Lorimer Fison, a missionary who wrote articles on anthropological topics in the *Australasian* (Fraser 1909, p. 150; Stanner 1972, pp. 432–435). Howitt was joint author with Fison of *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (Fison and Howitt

1880), to which he contributed material on the Kurnai people, gathered while he was a magistrate and guardian of Aboriginal people in Gippsland. From 1874, through Fison's influence, Howitt began to correspond with US anthropologist and social theorist Lewis Henry Morgan (Stern 1930).

The missionaries at Killalpaninna had learnt the Diyari language as a part of their evangelical activities and during the 1890s they became aware, from scientists such as Dr Erhard Eylmann who visited in 1900 and from letters of inquiry from German ethnologists, that there was considerable interest in the traditions and customs of Australian Aborigines. As a result, missionaries Otto Siebert, Johann Reuther and Wolfgang Reidel gathered ethnographic information from Diyari and Wangkangurru people and made collections of Aboriginal artefacts (Nobbs 2008; Stevens 1994). Two policemen, Samuel Gason and George Aiston, also collected information. Gason (1874) published a pamphlet on the Diyari, while Aiston published his knowledge of Aboriginal life in the Lake Eyre Basin gained from Wangkangurru people in 1924 (Aiston and Horne 1924).

Howitt used knowledge gained during the Burke and Wills relief expeditions to write about the Aboriginal people of Lake Eyre and Cooper Creek. Initially, he corresponded with Hermann Vogelsang, Carl Meyer and Johann Flierl, but later made considerable use of ethnographic information gathered by Siebert (Howitt 1891; Howitt and Siebert 1904). Information on the Diyari makes up a significant part of Howitt's publications on Aboriginal kinship and folklore. When *Native Tribes of Southeast Australia* was published in 1904 Siebert claimed that he was intended to be a joint author with Howitt but that illness had prevented him from contributing to the conclusion. Howitt published the work in his name only (Stevens 1994, p. 224).

The Diyari material was used by Howitt to support his 'group marriage' hypothesis, a period of promiscuous sexual relations

within a social evolutionary model (Howitt and Fison 1882). It is clear from letters to Morgan that Howitt and Fison defended Morgan's and their own ideas on group marriage against criticisms levelled by some leading anthropologists of the time – McLellan, Lubbock, Tylor and Lang (Stern 1930; Hiatt 1996). Stanner (1972, p. 435) listed Howitt, along with Lorimer Fison, Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, as a founder of anthropology in Australia. Despite Mulvaney's (1970, p. 216) claim that Howitt had a sympathetic interest in Aboriginal society, his writings are largely impersonal, rarely mentioning Aboriginal informants by name.

Perceived difficulties with the information provided by Howitt and Gason stimulated both Radcliffe Brown (1914) and Elkin to take up the problem of Diyari kinship (Korn 1971). In 1930, Adolphus Peter Elkin, newly appointed lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sydney, began a year of fieldwork in the Corner Country, seeking to document the social organisation of Aboriginal tribes living in the northern part of South Australia and the southern part of the Northern Territory. Elkin's choice of subject matter – kinship and social organisation – and his method of fieldwork, mostly interviewing Aborigines in camps or on station verandas, closely followed that of Radcliffe Brown, then Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney and author of *Social Organisation of Australian Tribes* (Brown 1930; Hogbin [1988]). Many of the debates on kinship, marriage and social arrangements which were lively at the time appear pointless from our contemporary perspective (Korn 1971; Schneider 1984).

Elkin, who travelled thousands of kilometres by private car, mail coach and camel, provided a snapshot of the Aboriginal people he met. In the desert area between Oodnadatta and the Musgrave Ranges he came across about 30 men, women and children, living 'in a totally uncivilized manner: they wear no covering of any kind



night or day, even though the temperature sometimes falls during the night to freezing point; they have a minimum of weapons and implements – spear, spear-thrower with a stone chisel affixed to the end of the haft, a wooden dish and stones for grinding seed – and they depend for food on hunting and collecting’ (Elkin 1931, pp. 44–46).

He contrasted these circumstances with those he found in north-eastern South Australia and the country around the Cooper, where the area had been largely ‘depopulated’. Elkin interviewed ‘remnants’ of the Wangkangurru, Yandruwandha, Yawarrawarrka, Marrula, Ngamini and Diyari living in the district between Strzelecki Creek, Innamincka and Birdsville, whom he estimated numbered about 160 persons within a total Aboriginal population of 400 persons (Elkin 1931, pp. 44,48). From there, he travelled across to north-western New South Wales to confirm information about the Wilyali and Malyanapa tribes from a Wilyali man living Innamincka, where he noted, ‘The Tibooburra camp consisted of one adult black and one adult half-caste with three women and some children. One half-caste husband was away on a station, while another half-caste family was on the move north-wards’ (Elkin 1931, p. 48).

An outcome of Elkin’s research was his definition of an ‘Eastern or “Lakes” Group of Tribes’, occupying the country around lakes Gairdner, Torrens, Eyre, Gregory, Blanche, Callabonna and Frome, and the freshwater rivers filled by the floodwaters of the Cooper and Diamantina (Elkin 1931, pp. 51–53). Elkin’s formulation represents an extension of Howitt’s ‘Dieri Nation’, observing that this large group of Aboriginal tribes shared features both with Aboriginal people located further in the Central Australian deserts and with the river tribes to the east and south, notably the Paakantyi. In terms of initiation practices, they shared circumcision with the desert tribes and the rites of cicatrisation (Wilyaru) and tooth evulsion with the river tribes.

Also during the 1930s, medical anthropologist H.K. Fry (1937) published two articles on Diyari legends. These are remarkable for being dictated and written in Diyari language by Sam Dintibana Kinjmilina, who was literate in Diyari but not in English. The translator was Ted Vogelsang, son of the missionary Hermann Vogelsang; like Sam, he was brought up on Killalpaninna mission. The articles include both the Diyari and English versions of the stories. In one place, Fry indicated that Sam could provide a story only after he had talked with its owner, Larrikin Mick, a Yandruwandha man: ‘Sam promised to complete the missing parts of some of the legends already given when we returned to Mirra Mitta, but our stay there was too short to make this possible. A blank book was left with Sam, and he promised to write down the legends we required in consultation with other old men. Two months later the book arrived with the following legends written by Sam in the Dieri language. Mr. Vogelsang has translated these’ (Fry 1937, p. 271).

A similar collaboration occurred in 1942 when Ronald Berndt recorded a text from a Diyari man, Andreas Dibana, then convalescing at the Magill Old Folks’ Home in Adelaide (Berndt 1953). This text was partly recorded in Diyari with further translations from English to Diyari by Ted Vogelsang. Berndt commented on a number of published Diyari texts including one recorded by Vogelsang from an Aboriginal Doctor, or Clever Man, Elias Baigalina, and published as Berndt and Vogelsang (1941).

Most of the anthropological writings concentrated on reconstructing the traditional period. A change came with Jeremy Beckett’s anthropological fieldwork at Wilcannia in 1957–58. This research included a series of biographical accounts, particularly those of George Dutton, a man of Wangkumara and Malyangapa descent, and Walter Newman (Beckett 1958). Beckett’s approach was sociological, documenting the history of European–Aboriginal relations

through biography and through the circumstances Aboriginal people in western New South Wales experienced in their working lives and on government mission stations.

Since 1970, a number of linguists have worked with Aboriginal people in the Corner Country to recover stories and language information. Gavan Breen worked with a Yandruwandha man, Bennie Kerwin, recording Corner Country texts (Breen 1990; Kerwin 1986; Kerwin and Breen 1980–81), while Stefan Wurm collected information on Wangkumara from a Galali man, Charlie Phillips. These linguistic studies revealed extraordinary instances of language retention despite many decades of neither speaking the language nor hearing it spoken. In this context, the work of Luise Hercus has been truly extraordinary, travelling the far reaches of the Corner Country to seek out stories, speakers, place-names and the personal histories of Aboriginal language speakers (Austin *et al.* 1990; Beckett and Hercus 2009; Hercus 1980, 1982, 1994, 2009a, b; Hercus and Austin 2004; for a bibliography of Hercus' work to 1990 see Kat 1990). Peter Austin (1981, 1990a, b; Austin *et al.* 1990) worked similarly with Diyari speakers.

## The welfare period, 1912–1972

Overlapping with the period of pastoral settlement, the establishment of Christian missions and the initiation of anthropological interest in Aboriginal culture were the policies and actions of the governments of South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland. While there were differences in policy implementation from state to state, the effects on Aboriginal people of forcible relocation to mission or government reserves, the loss of civil liberties, the removal of children to state institutions, the exploitation of Aboriginal labour, the control of movement and the poor living conditions on many reserves have been uniformly disastrous. This part of the story is beyond the scope of this work and readers are

directed to the many sources of information on these topics (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission 1996; Baldry and Green 2002; Copland *et al.* 2006; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997; May 1994; Raynes 2002).

Aboriginal people in northern South Australia may have been slightly better off than their relatives in New South Wales and Queensland. From 1866 to 1912 Aboriginal welfare was managed through a series of Protectors of Aborigines, who made use of the missions and pastoral stations to distribute rations (Brock 1995; Forster 2000). As noted previously, leases made some provision for continued Aboriginal access to their own lands, and there were no specific reserves created in north-eastern South Australia.

This was not the case in Queensland, where a policy of concentration on reserves and the forcible relocation of Aboriginal people was ruthlessly pursued. Copland *et al.* (2006, pp. 124–125) related the case of Wangkumara people from the Cooper Creek area who moved to Tibooburra in 1938 to escape the harsh conditions in Queensland, only to be forcibly removed from there to the Brewarrina mission in northern New South Wales.

Aboriginal people have documented the effects of this period of 'welfare' through biographical and autobiographical writings, creating a space where Aboriginal storytellers and European readers meet on the basis of a shared humanity, one that might transcend the perception of difference (Kurtzer 2003, pp. 186–187). The stories told by Jimmie Blacksmith, George Dutton, Myles Lalor and Ben Murray detailed the hardships and the courage of Aboriginal individuals in the face of huge difficulties (Austin *et al.* 1988; Barker and Mathews 1988; Beckett 1996; Lalor and Beckett 2000; Read *et al.* 2008).

## What is happening now?

Despite the difficult history of European–Aboriginal relations in the Corner Country over the past 150 years, there has been a

renewal of Aboriginal ties to their lands over the past two decades. Between 2002 and 2011, Aboriginal peoples from the far north-east of South Australia lodged a number of claims with the National Native Title Tribunal: the Adnyamathanha Native Title Claim, the Dieri Native Title Claim, the Dieri No. 2 Native Title Claim, the Yandruwandha/Yawarrarrka Native Title Claim and the Wangkangurru/Yarluyandi Native Claim, claims which cover much of the north-east quarter of the state (South Australian Native Title Services 2009/2010). As of June 2012, the Adnyamathanha, Dieri and Wangkangurru/Yarluyandi claims had been determined in favour of the claimants by consent (South Australian Native Titles 2012). In addition, Indigenous Land Use Agreements have been signed covering minerals exploration in Yandruwandha/Yawarrarrka lands (Agreements, Treaties and Negotiated Settlements 2012). Yandruwandha/Yawarrarrka have negotiated with the government of South Australia to regain ownership of the Calliumarou Mission Block near Howitt's depot on the Cooper, which had been voted to their ownership in 1862 in response to their treatment of Burke, Wills and King. Despite that, the South Australian government sold it in 1875 (Tolcher 2003, p. 156).

These claims to country have not been without difficulties, particularly over overlapping claims between Aboriginal groups and cross-agreements with mining companies which are very active in the Lake Eyre Basin. In 1999, there was conflict between the Dieri-Mitha Council and the Arabunna Nulla Kari-Ku Wanga Association over Western Mining Corporation activities at the Roxby Downs uranium mine (<http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/19779>). On the other hand, in 2009 conflicts over the northern Flinders Ranges between the Adnyamathanha claim and claims by the Kuyani, Arabunna, Barngarla, Diyari and Nukunu peoples were resolved by agreement (<http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/41446>).

As part of its environmental impact statement for the proposed Olympic Dam mine, BHP Billiton consulted with the main native claimants – the Barnjala, Kokatha and Kuyani peoples – as well as with Diyari, Adnyamathanha, Yandruwandha/Yawarrarrka and Arabunna, over lands that the gas pipeline would cross. This resulted in the Olympic Dam Agreement, under which payments are made to those communities and provision is made for Aboriginal trainees to be part of the archaeological survey of affected areas (BHP Billiton 2012).

In 1994, Stevens wrote a pessimistic assessment of Aboriginal survival in the Corner Country, commenting 'In the 1860s, when the Lutherans first ventured into the Killalpaninna area, there were estimated to have been about 3000 to 5000 people living in the Lake Eyre region, with about a dozen different languages spoken ... A hundred years later their languages were all but extinct, with only a handful of aged descendants capable of speaking any of the indigenous languages' (Stevens 1994, p. 203).

This picture of desolation and loss can be contrasted with the activities of Aboriginal people to regain their lands through the Native Title and other tribunals. Austin recently commented that the Diyari language is far from extinct and that he had had the pleasure of studying it with five generations of a single family, including, in 1974, a Wangkangurru woman, Frieda Merrick, who was born in 1885 and who learnt Diyari during her early years at Killalpaninna Mission (Austin 2012).

When the Royal Society of Victoria announced that it would run events to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Burke and Wills expedition, it received an offer of help from Aaron Paterson, a Yandruwandha man. Paterson related Burke and Wills stories told to him by older relatives. One, from his mother, related how the Yandruwandha were puzzled by the aimless wandering of the explorers and considered them mad or under a spell, not

knowing how to get back to the country they had come from. Paterson also related that his great-grandfather's grandfather described Burke as 'a mean-spirited person who rejected our offers of friendship and food' (Royal Society of Victoria 2012). Similarly, Janet Mathews (1968, 2010) collected accounts concerning Burke and Wills from Wangkumara people, the Ebsworth family and the late Lorna Dixon, including information that Wangkumara people hid King from visiting groups who would have killed him if they knew of his presence.

This account of the Aboriginal people of the Corner Country has come full circle, its various parts linked through the story of the Burke and Wills expedition. The Corner Country itself forms a connection from Sturt, through Harris Brown and McKinlay to the expedition. The kindness of the Yandruwandha led to the establishment of the Moravian and Lutheran missions at Killalpaninna and Kopperamanna, which had deep impacts on Diyari language and culture. Howitt, having rescued King and recovered the bodies of Burke and Wills, figuratively returned to the Lake Eyre region through his correspondence with Otto Siebert then wrote a work that was a starting-point for anthropology in Australia. The work of Brown and Elkin on Diyari kinship was stimulated by information provided by Howitt and Gason.

The explorers Sturt, Burke and Wills represent the beginnings of the process of settlement and the taking of the Aboriginal lands, a process that did not include provision for Aboriginal people beyond their usefulness as pastoral workers (Banner 2005). Despite the difficulties imposed by the welfare system, the Diyari, the Yandruwandha and other Aboriginal peoples have steadfastly held onto their connection with the land and are now active in Native Title claims to retrieve it. Descendants of the Yandruwandha, who greeted Burke and Wills 150 years ago, remain on the Cooper welcoming those taking part in commemorative re-enactments of the Burke and Wills expedition.

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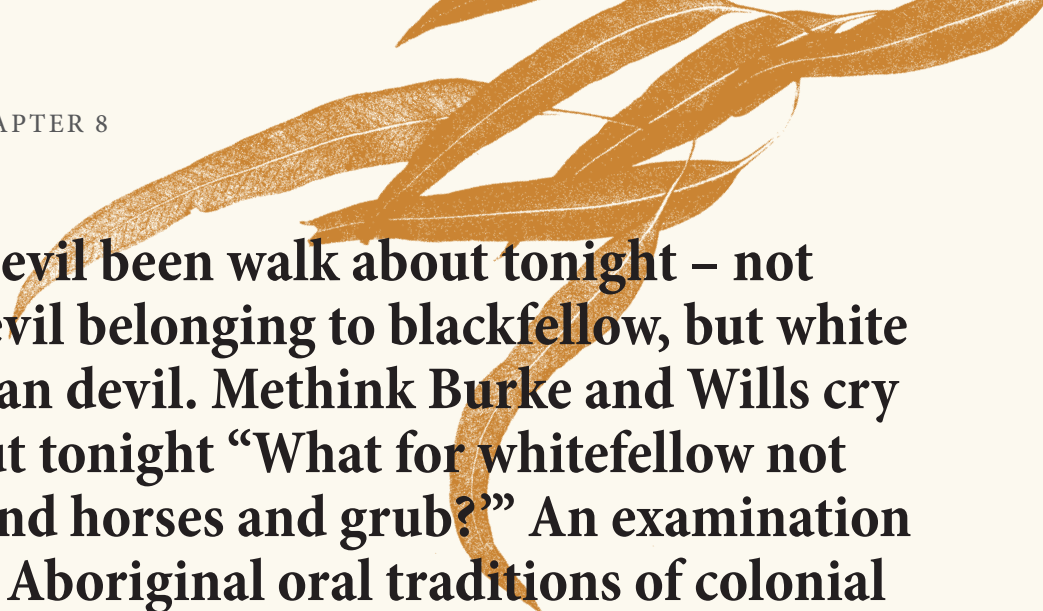


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# **‘Devil been walk about tonight – not devil belonging to blackfellow, but white man devil. Methink Burke and Wills cry out tonight “What for whitefellow not send horses and grub?”’ An examination of Aboriginal oral traditions of colonial explorers**

*Fred Cahir*

In the historic encounters between the ‘explorers’ and Aboriginal peoples, the land was mapped, narrated and claimed. But it was not a case of explorers working on their own, plotting their way through a foreign land. They were helped, willingly and sometimes unwillingly, by Aboriginal people. The writing of Australian exploration history has been selective; there are very few published accounts of how Aboriginal people remembered or memorialised these ‘others’ first incursions onto their lands. This chapter excavates historical sources for Aboriginal narratives about their encounters with explorers such as Burke and Wills.

Writing about Aboriginal history is problematic for a non-Indigenous historian. Clark (1994, p. 31) cautioned that writing history about Aboriginal Australians by

non-Aboriginal Australians is ‘necessarily, the imposition of an alien explanatory framework on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ experience and understanding’ and that scouring through historical records produced by non-Aboriginal people in search of accounts by Aboriginal people about non-Aboriginal people is particularly problematic.

This chapter first outlines some general oral accounts of Aboriginal perspectives towards non-Indigenous people during the early exploratory period of contact. It then charts the attitudes of Aboriginal peoples toward the Burke and Wills expedition(s) as recorded during the whites’ travails on Aboriginal lands, and finally relates some of their recorded perspectives about the Burke and Wills expedition and the rescue expeditions that followed in their wake.



## Aboriginal perspectives of explorers

From very early primary non-Indigenous records there are traces of how Aboriginal people perceived non-Aboriginal people. Sometimes these traces are mere intuitive notes in the margins of letters and journals of white people, while at other times there is a clear appreciation of how the Aboriginal 'other' viewed the coloniser. Explorers' narratives often signal their awareness of Aboriginal views of the interlopers on their land and Aboriginal-centric attitudes towards non-Aboriginal people. For example, Watkin Tench was accompanied by the two earliest recorded Aboriginal explorer-guides in the fledgling colony of New South Wales, Colbee and Boladree, who found the Englishmen's clumsiness in the Australian bush greatly entertaining. Tench (1961, p. 112) recorded the hilarity when 'any of us either tripped or stumbled ... They imitated the leaping of the kangaroo; sang; danced; poised their spear and met in mock encounter. But their principal source of merriment was again derived from our misfortunes, in tumbling amidst nettles, and sliding down precipices, which they mimicked with inimitable drollery'. Giles' narrative in 1873 during one of his expeditions into the interior of northern Australia is an interesting example of reading the 'others' thoughts on the white colonisers' usurpation of land and resources. On Christmas Day 1873, after Giles' party had drunk heavily from precious Aboriginal water holes, a group of Aboriginal people shouted abuse at the party. Giles' insight into their ill-feeling towards whites was noted thus: 'He most undoubtedly stigmatized us as vile and useless ... took upon ourselves the right to occupy any country or waters we might chance to see ... killed and ate wallabies thereby depriving him and his friends of their natural and lawful game' (Giles 1875, p. 43). Giles was well-positioned to express the 'others' viewpoint, having been told in no uncertain terms on one occasion when his party

approached a valuable water hole to 'Walk whitefella, walk.'

Aboriginal accounts such as the one recorded by George Haydon (1941) exploring in the Gippsland region of Victoria in 1844 is striking for its incredulity about the white man's ineptitude. Haydon, trekking in uncharted country, had not discerned some existing white tracks and a white campsite; he was shown them by his unidentified Boonwurrung guide. Haydon recorded the disdainful comments of his guide: 'Now white man berry clever, no mistake make him house, and flour, and tea, and sugar, and tobacco, and clothes, but white fellow no find out when another white man walk along a road – I believe sometimes white man berry stupid.' Occasionally it is necessary to read between the lines to discern Aboriginal people's disdain and amazement at white people's incompetence in the bush. William Wills' father, having travelled to Victoria in 1853, described the perfunctory and dismissive manner in which an unidentified Aboriginal guide showed him the right track to reunite with his son: 'At the station I took a native black for my guide. He brought me to a place where my horse had nearly to swim across the creek, pointed to a dry path, exclaimed, "There," then turned his own animal and rode off. I followed the track for about three miles, and found myself in front of the hut' (Wills 1863, p. 26).

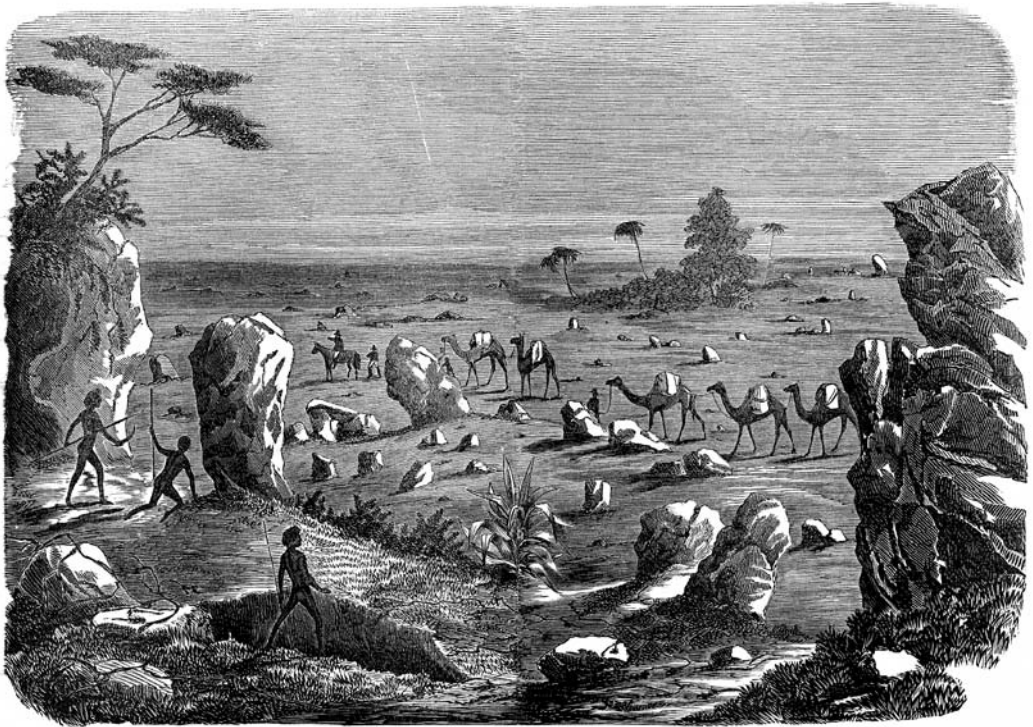
There is evidence that in Queensland there were similar assessments of white people's ineptitude in the bush. Lowe (1994) noted that the Kalkadoons in northern Queensland were aware of Burke and Wills' party travelling through their country (in his diary Wills recorded seeing columns of smoke to the east and west while travelling through Kalkadoon country) and that 'years later they were astonished to hear that the party had starved to death in what was to them a country rich in food' (Lowe 1994, p. 32) (see Figure 8.1). At other times, Aboriginal people such as Imbat wrestled with explorers' motives for leaving their own land

and risking their lives in a land they knew nothing of. Imbat asked George Grey, after his torturous journey of exploration in north-western Australia, 'What for do you who have plenty to eat, and much money, walk so far away in the bush? You had plenty to eat at home, why did you not stop there?' (Grey 1842, vol. 2, p. 93). A very amusing account of an Aboriginal outlook on the clumsiness and ineptness of whites in general was recorded by George Neumayer (1869) during a magnetic survey of Victoria he undertook in 1862, shortly after having been a member of the Burke and Wills expedition. Neumayer (1869) recorded how Tommy, an Aboriginal (possibly Daungwurrung) guide, could barely disguise his utter disdain of the dimwitted whites he regularly had to rescue from perishing in the bush:

*We returned very much fatigued, and found that Edward had not got tea ready, being afraid to leave the camp, lest he*

*should get lost in the bush. Sent one of the Blacks with him. Tommy thought it very stupid of white fellows to venture into the bush at all as they were so much afraid. 'Why don't you take a Bible with you', he asked the servant suddenly; and on my inquiring of him what he meant, he replied with a sly expression on his face, that 'supposing Mr G--- was going into the bush, he being big one frightened, he took a bible, and supposing he lost his way, he would get'm Bible and pray to that "Big-one" and he tells him' but added he 'I have to go and get him out' (Neumayer 1869, p. 59).*

It is necessary to bear in mind that during this period Aboriginal guides in Victoria had generally acquired proficiency in speaking English and many had elementary reading and writing skills, and thus would probably have discussed the Burke and Wills expedition or possibly seen newspaper



THE BURKE AND WILLS EXPEDITION CROSSING THE DESERT.—(SEE PAGE 124.)

Figure 8.1: 'The Burke and Wills expedition crossing the desert'. Wood engraving, 25 June 1862. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. IAM25/06/62/116.

reports. In addition, it is likely that Neumayer's party would have been like that of Howitt (1907, p. 12) where 'all interested in the news, and I remember talking about the VEE [Victorian Exploration Expedition] with some of the men by the campfire in the evening'. As Tommy was probably aware of Burke and Wills' fate and his comments were made soon after the news of Burke and Wills' demise, some of the disdainful sting may have been directed at Burke and Wills and their ilk.

## How might Aboriginal people have viewed the Burke and Wills expeditions?

To Aboriginal people, the appearance of the Burke and Wills expedition would have been a significant event. According to Mathews (1904), Aboriginal people across Australia thought that Europeans were deceased clan members who had returned to life, and in some cases the belief persisted many decades after contact had been established (Clark and Cahir 2011). Indeed, King considered that the Yandruwandha perceived him as one of them, an indication that they believed white people to be reincarnated clans people.<sup>1</sup> There is also substantial evidence (Tolcher 1986) which demonstrates that parties of whites, probably drovers, had been in the Cooper Creek region prior to Burke and Wills in 1860–61, including Sturt in 1845. The Burke and Wills expedition was not the first time the Yandruwandha had seen white people. Nor would news of the whites, their technologies and horses have been a secret. Clark and Cahir (2003) attested how Aboriginal people from across Australia were attracted to the Victorian goldfields and cities in the 19th century for a raft of reasons. The goldfields offered 'commercial opportunities for trade and exchange and they were exotic places where unusual people lived with strange possessions and animals' (Clark and Cahir 2003, p. 127). News of these places was relayed into the interior in the shape of songs, stories and

artefacts. It is easy to forget, too, that for some Aboriginal people, especially those directly acquainted and/or involved with the expedition such as Peter, one of the Aboriginal guides recruited to accompany the explorers, the attraction of joining the expedition could lie in its potential accomplishments and the personal satisfaction to be derived from its success.

Researchers focusing on Aboriginal motives for their engagement with explorers, such as Baker (1988), Reynolds (2000) and more recently Cahir (2010), have discussed the vital role of guiding, especially for such a prestigious exploration party as the Burke and Wills expedition, the rationale for which was complex – clearly many Aboriginal people took on the role spontaneously out of their sense of sheer enjoyment derived from 'walking and talking their country' and 'they ruled supreme and there was a natural incentive for Aboriginal people to feel empowered in their superiority over the clumsy and inept colonisers' (Cahir 2010, p. 36). For example, Beckler wrote with surprise at Duroodoo of how Peter had assumed some tenure in achieving the party's goals:

*Peter told us of certain signs that Dick [another Aboriginal guide] had informed him the natives would lay along our path to let us know that we were in the immediate vicinity of the captives ... Peter was full of eagerness, indeed he showed an interest in the success of our journey that one would not have expected in a native. He rode some distance ahead of us, his penetrating gaze roaming in all directions. Suddenly he turned about and sprang back towards us, announcing with delight that he could already see MacPherson (Beckler 1993, pp. 63–64).*

The size and uniqueness of the Burke and Wills expedition was a drawcard. Neumayer (1869) described with some admiration his first glimpse of the imposing cavalcade near Balranald, noting that he descended into a little plain and saw in the distance the 'whole

train of the V.E.E'. Beckler (1993, p. 82) wrote of Aboriginal people visiting the expedition's camps and on one occasion expressed surprise at 'the pleasure that they took in us and particularly in Peter [Aboriginal guide] seemed endless. One question followed another and their laughing and shouting rang out far into the silent, moonlit night'. The various expedition parties all recorded Aboriginal groups expressing a great desire to meet and greet the white strangers on their land, presumably to take in the sights which the large party of travellers afforded. On some occasions the interest was two-way. The Aborigines left quite an impression on Becker: 'During the night the natives that we met here [near present-day Swan Hill] set alight a large tree-trunk and we had a radiantly illuminated night scene whose effect well outdid many forms of artificial lighting' (Tipping 1993, p. 26). The animals were of particular interest to both white and Aboriginal peoples, particularly the first large herd of camels introduced into Australia,<sup>2</sup> for the purpose of carrying the Burke and Wills expedition's goods and members. Bourke's (2010) study revealed that a major spectator drawcard was the presence of camels at Royal Park in Melbourne. Eliza Lucas (1876, pp. 9–10), a resident of Melbourne, reminisced about her sadness 'about witnessing the departure of Burke and Wills' and recalled going to Royal Park (the departure point) and the nearby Melbourne General Cemetery to see the 'blacks dance their corroboree ... and the blackfellows feed the camels'. The advent of horses throughout the route taken by the expedition was certainly not novel to Aborigines, as evidenced by Beckler's (1993, p. 52) description of Aboriginal rock art in a gorge on the journey to Duroodoo which included what 'seemed to represent a rider on horseback'. Further testimony came from Sturt's (1849) description of his party who, 15 years previously, had noted the bravery and almost-familiarity with horses of Aboriginal people at Cooper Creek:

*Several of them brought us large troughs of water, and when we had taken a little, held them up for our horses to drink; an instance of nerve that is very remarkable, for I am quite sure that no white man, (having never seen or heard of a horse before, and with the natural apprehension on the first sight of such an animal would create), would deliberately have walked up to what must have appeared to them most formidable brutes, and placing the troughs they carried across their breast, have allowed the horses to drink with their noses almost touching them (Sturt 1849, p. 76).*

### Aboriginal responses to camels

Camels were certainly exotic animals, however, which prompted intense discussion (Allen 2011). Beckler noted that the local Aboriginal clans at Terrick Terrick Station could not be tempted to come near the camels – they thought the camels were 'bunyips' and accordingly to be greatly feared. Ludwig Becker confirmed on two occasions (Terrick Terrick and several days later at Spewah) the remarks made by Beckler about the awe with which the camels were held:

*4 natives, among them a lubra, went their Steps [sic] slowly towards the camp. With eyes and mouths wide open, speechless they stared at the Bunjibs,<sup>3</sup> our camels, but refused to go nearer than a spears throw. Although no strangers at Dr Rowe's station, and notwithstanding our assurance that the camels were only harmless 'big sheep,' they turned their back towards them and squatted soon around a far off camp fire of their own, conversing in their native tongue; probably about the character of these illustrious strangers (Tipping 1979, p. 194).*

Becker further added, hoping for a similar fearful admiration of camels throughout the interior, that perhaps intercultural violence



could be avoided 'if this first interview between natives and camels might be used as a criterion when coming in contact with the blacks ... as long as the mesmeric power of our "Bunjibs" remain with them' (Tipping 1979, p. 195). Wills' journal (Wills 1863, p. 207) of the Cloncurry district revealed that a small Aboriginal family group was 'dreadfully frightened' of the whites who they called 'Joe Joe' and, upon seeing the camels, hastened their flight from the expedition. It is apparent, however, that Aboriginal people's dread of the camels differed markedly according to their level of exposure to the frontier and to frontier people. An unidentified Aborigine 'rode on a camel' at Bilbaka and Aboriginal children in the Swan Hill region were said to be 'intoxicated with joy and excitement' at the sight of 'the big emus with four legs' and 'scampered about with the delight of school children at their first circus' (Tipping 1979, pp. 200, 203). Kalkadoon people in northern Queensland viewed the camels with great fear. Twenty years after the expedition had passed through their country Kalkadoon elders told of how they had intended 'to attack and kill the explorers and had prepared themselves by feasting on kangaroo meat, holding ceremonies and painting their chests with ochre and chalk. But when the time came for the ambush, the warriors realised that the men were accompanied by giant roaring beasts, which they assumed must be supernatural. They retreated and watched the party from a safe distance high up in the cliffs' (Murgatroyd 2002, p. 203). Other Aboriginal accounts of camels and white men in the Cooper Creek district filtered into Adelaide. In 1861 two camels (presumed to have escaped from the expedition) made their way into South Australian settled districts. The news was relayed by telegraph to Melbourne. Subsequent reports by Aboriginal people from the northern districts of South Australia also told of a party of white men who were described as 'being entirely naked; that they

had no firearms nor horses, but some great animals which were called "gobble gobble," from the noise they made in their throats' (Wills 1863, pp. 261–263).

According to Nugent (2006) Aboriginal testimonies or oral commemorations of colonial encounters occurred frequently in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is perhaps of some import that the memorialisation of camels as emus persisted into the 20th century: Carl Strehlow, a German missionary, recorded Arrente words and sign language for the cameleers, which was 'black' and for 'Kamula (camel) the hand sign for emu was used, which imitated the movement of the emus' neck' (Jones and Kenny 2007, p. 23).<sup>4</sup> Emu ancestor stories were integral to Yandruwandha lore; for example, Elkin (1934, p. 234) recorded one whereby 'emus were changed into the Parachilna deposit of red ochre'. Thus the connection of camels with emus is conceivably significant – the appearance of men accompanied by a noteworthy Creation-type creature may help to explain the determined, even pushy generosity of the Yandruwandha towards the expedition members. More research is needed, however, into Aboriginal views on introduced species such as camels because, as Trigger (2008) noted, select introduced animals (including buffaloes, dogs, cats and cattle) were incorporated into local Creation stories and 'mythologised'.

Of much more importance for Aboriginal people, especially as the expedition moved north into more arid regions, was the knowledge that such a large party would consume large volumes of water. The expedition's records indicate little awareness of the fierce reputation Aboriginal people had for defending their precious water supplies. In contrast, Frederick Walker (1863, p. 143), the leader of one of the relief expeditions, was well aware of the issue. His summation of the cause of a massacre by his party which left over 12 Aboriginal people dead read, 'our possession of the spring was no doubt the



*casus belli*. The presence of many horses, camels and men at the one locality for an extended period of time, such as Wright and Beckler's party, was the cause of much friction. Beckler (1993), botanical collector and doctor, was amazed at how much camels drank: 'it is the most absurd mistake to believe that camels can go for five or six days without water and still feel well. After a day's march, camels drink with almost as much enthusiasm as horses'. Beckler (1993) observed the prodigious volume of water the expedition's camels drew from Aboriginal water holes: 'Sitting on a camel which had not had a drop of water for four days in the middle of January, I could not move the animal away from the water at all when we arrived at Pamamero Creek. It drank and drank, and I felt how the sides of the animals gradually expanded until, with my legs spread wide apart, I could scarcely keep my seat' (Beckler 1993, p. 121).

Some muted indication of Aboriginal people's objection to and indignation with the expedition's usurpation of water resources is gleaned from Beckler's journal,

which describes how the party, in the middle of summer (24 December), 'reached a creek, Nanthurngee, the first that we had seen full of water since leaving the Darling ... where life was everywhere. We saw the camp, just abandoned, of some natives; indeed, we could still hear their shrill shouts' (Beckler 1993, pp. 56–57). He added, offhandedly, 'At our approach they had moved further down the creek.' Some months later Beckler and others in his party had become much more aware of their cultural transgressions, through more intimate cross-cultural 'conversations'. In February 1861, his journal reveals his understanding of the Aborigines' great consternation at the explorers' over-hunting of birds and lack of respect for reciprocal hunting rights (see Ch. 2) (see Figure 8.2).

## Cross-cultural communications

Understandably, the often-negative attitudes of explorers towards Aboriginal people frequently affected how Aboriginal people perceived white people. Changing first



Figure 8.2: 'River Darling and the mouth of the Bamamero Creek, at sunset with the ante twi-light. Decbr. 19 1860. Darling Depot'. Ludwig Becker. 1860. The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

appraisals of each other was sometimes slow to occur but sometimes rapid. This phenomenon appears to be pan-Australian, as there was often a strong commonality between initial contact experiences in instances of crisis (such as shipwreck victims) by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in the annals of Australian history. James Morrill (Morrill *et al.* 2006) was one of a party of shipwreck victims marooned from 1847 to 1864 on the far northern Queensland coast; his story is a representative example of many first-contact experiences in the shadow of crisis:

*They pointed to our stomachs, to make us understand they knew we were hungry; and to their own that they had plenty. They also pointed to the bush to tell us if we came with them, they would give us plenty to eat and drink. On our signifying our intention to go with them, they were very glad, and wanted us to join with them in a corroboree, but as we could not, we thought we should please them by singing a hymn. I accordingly gave out a hymn I knew – God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform etc. To the end which we sung, and which amazed them much (Morrill et al. 2006, p. 38).*

It is interesting to note that Morrill was seriously reprimanded and threatened with severe punishment for ‘allowing’ his fellow castaways to perish – an abominable act, from an Aboriginal perspective. The Aborigines clearly had strong cultural mores about the obligations of hospitality and helping others.

Significantly, Morrill recorded that a special corroboree was performed ‘evening after evening to distant tribes’ in order to show other communities where the white people had come from and how they were discovered. Throughout Australia, Aboriginal ceremonies or corroborees were performed to announce news about non-Indigenous strangers and their epochs, including

convicts gaining a pardon, railways, Christian religion and warfare (McDonald 1996; Parker 2007; Cahir and Clark 2010). Cahir and Clark noted a considerable corpus of evidence demonstrating that during the mid 19th century Aboriginal ceremonies changed considerably; they also travelled rapidly across colonial borders. In preliterate societies, information is often conveyed by song narratives based on significant activities and events such as battles, dugong hunting expeditions, the gathering of tubers, and European contact narratives. Hercus’ (1980) translation of a travelling ceremony in the region covered by the explorers showed how songs about Europeans and the ‘new’ things moved quickly and widely across Aboriginal Australia. There is another striking example of an Aboriginal voice which explores the dilemma faced by Aboriginal guides such as Dick and Peter. In a report from the Darling depot (27 November 1860: Tipping 1979, p. 190) to the Royal Society of Victoria, Becker included a transcription of a song and tune from the Lower Murray and Upper Darling tribes, saying that the ‘Australian Native Songs’ may prove ‘interesting enough to lovers of primitive songs and tunes’. The song spoke of the quandary of an Aboriginal male, presumably a guide, living between two worlds and outside his country – the world of whites, symbolised by his use of a blanket and the inability to understand other Aboriginal people, and the Aboriginal world symbolised by possum rugs and marrying into the right skin (colour). The song ends by lamenting the bitter knowledge that if the guide leaves with the whites he risks having his intended wife stolen by whites. A measure of its authenticity is Becker’s note that it was a ‘translation of a Corroboree song which a young Murray Black dictated to me in English: I wrote it down word for word. The same young man also favored me with a love song, repeating it several times so as to enable me to note correctly words and melody’ (Tipping 1979, p. 190):

'C'

*Yaam-song (Corroborree song). Lower Murray*

*I am with the white people,  
But all my tribe in the camp at home,  
And I am living with the white people;  
And I am amongst other Blacks,  
And can not understand their speaking!  
Wheregara was my country,  
But I am covering myself with the blanket  
now,  
And I am not covered with my opossum  
rug,  
And I cannot make it:  
Can not get the opossum to make the rug,  
I am with the white people now  
And I can not go to my home yet!  
I can not get married to my color  
Being now with the white people;  
And if I want to marry my color,  
I must go home –  
And if I marry to my color  
And if I go to another country, With the  
white people, And leave behind my lubra,  
Perhaps white people take her,  
And give her to another Black –  
And this I do not like!! 'Ugh!'*

As substantial evidence exists of European events and people entering into Aboriginal lore via songs and corroborees, it seems logical that corroborees performed throughout the Cooper Creek region and further afield would have heralded and commemorated the Burke and Wills party, as occurred for Morrill's party in northern Queensland.

It is worth noting that Morrill survived because he was adopted into an Aboriginal kinship-style family who educated him in Aboriginal ecological knowledge and bush

craft: 'The importance of Morrill's experience would have been practically illustrated had his services been at the disposal of the late lamented Victorian expedition by the preservation of Burke and Wills' lives, through his knowledge of Indigenous articles of food, and the consequent certainty of their ultimate return to relate their own achievements' (*Rockhampton Bulletin*, 14 March 1866). The northern Queensland Aboriginal responses to destitute non-Aboriginal people were mirrored, to a significant extent, in the Yandruwandha people's responses to Burke and Wills expedition members, for example the frequent offering of food, trading in goods, the acceptance of King into family networks and lamentations at the death of Burke. Wills remarked how they had benefited greatly from Aboriginal conventions of hospitality to travellers: 'Proceeding on our course across the marsh, we came to a channel through which the sea water enters. Here we passed three blacks, who as is universally their custom, pointed out to us, unasked, the best part down. This assisted us greatly, for the ground we were taking was very boggy' (Wills 1863, p. 213).

Even the Aboriginal requests, bordering on insistence, for white people to dance or perform a song were mentioned in both Morrill's and Wills' accounts. Wills wrote with great annoyance that 'a large tribe of blacks came pestering us to go to their camp and have a dance, which we declined. They were very troublesome and nothing but the threat to shoot will keep them away' (Wills 1863, p. 179). Ironically, the expedition members had previously been treated to 'some pleasant hospitality' at Swan Hill in the shape of 'a corroboree by some 400 Aboriginals staged for the visitors' (Tipping 1979, p. 206).

Taylor (1983) detailed many of the recorded meetings between the Yandruwandha and Burke's party at Cooper Creek and remarked on the dramatic shift in the explorers' attitudes towards Aboriginal

people, also indicating a number of changes in attitudes towards the expedition parties by the Yandruwandha clanspeople in the Cooper Creek area. Wills recorded the Aborigines' familiarity with guns and their growing repertoire of oral and sign language with which to communicate with the whites:

*The blacks invited me away to a waterhole to eat fish, but I declined to do so ... When I refused, one took his boomerang and laid it over my shoulder, and then told me by signs that if I called out for Mr Burke, as I was doing that he would strike me. Upon this I got them all in front of the gonyah and fired a revolver over their heads, but they did not seem at all afraid, until I got out the gun, when they all ran away ... we saw no more of them till late that night, when they came with some cooked fish, and called out 'white fellow' (Wills 1863, p. 310).*

Taylor (1983) outlined how the relations seesawed rapidly, and how on one occasion Burke and party violently rebuffed a large delegation of Aboriginal people seemingly bent on cordial relations, by knocking away the proffered fish (see Ch. 3). Tolcher (2003, p. 51) theorised that Burke and Wills' erratic behaviour might have been interpreted as evidence that the 'white men were victims of sorcery.' It is also very possible that Burke's erratic behaviour was accounted for by the widely held Aboriginal view that white people were deceased clan members who had returned to life, and that the trans migratory journey had altered their tastes and behaviours. Clark and Cahir (2011, p. 106), in their study on Aboriginal perceptions of Europeans in 19th-century western Victoria, noted that the 'arrival of Europeans caused many to conclude that these newcomers must have belonged to the land, or at least knew of it, in a previous life'. Berndt and Berndt (1999, p. 492) suggested that while returning spirits or relatives might have been frightening for Aboriginal people, they could 'be fitted into the local scheme of things,

explained in terms of the local people's own experience, if not assumed to be related to them through kinship'. Clark and Cahir (2011) explained how the unpredictable behaviour of Europeans who were recognised as relatives, such as convict escapee William Buckley who lived with the Wathawurrung for 32 years (1803–35) in southern Victoria, might have been rationalised:

*As white people arrived and took residence at particular places, it was easily assumed they must have held an attachment for these places in some previous state of existence. That Europeans failed to recognise their former relatives and friends, and no longer spoke their language, was probably rationalised by assuming that the trauma of reincarnation or resuscitation had expunged the memory of their former Aboriginal identity (Clark and Cahir 2011, p. 106).*

After Burke and Wills perished, King fully appreciated that his survival was dependent on Aboriginal traditional knowledge – as Wills (1863) had observed on 24 June: 'we have but a slight chance of anything but starvation, unless we can get hold of some blacks' – and he developed strong ties with several clans. King was invited to stay in their encampments and 'was even more hospitably entertained than before'. In several instances his presence in their camp was viewed as a great exoticism and an Aboriginal couple entered into what appears to have been a kin relationship with him after he tended a woman's wounds and shared a crow he had shot (King 1863). The generosity and compassion shown to King intensified when he explained that he was now the sole European survivor. Taylor (1983) posited that King may have inadvertently created something of a cargo cult about the presence of white men and the moon by saying that 'the white men would be here before two moons and in the evenings, when they came with nardoo and fish, they used to talk about the "whitefellows" coming, at the same time

pointing to the moon. I also told them they would receive many presents, and they constantly asked me for tomahawks' (Wills 1863, p. 317). When the relief expedition arrived, the leader, A.W. Howitt (1907), discerned King's whereabouts from the Yandruwandha via hand signals, gestures and English phrases:

*I saw a blackfellow holding the firewood on his head with one hand and with the other making a number of gestures and signs. He was very excited, shouting out – what I could not understand – holding up one hand with some fingers extended, and then patting the ground, then again holding up his hand, and waving it towards the camp ... As we met the elder one said, 'Find em whitefella; two fella dead boy and one fella live' (Howitt 1907, pp. 26–27).*

Howitt noted that their arrival was no surprise, the bush telegraph having effectively communicated that 'we were expected, for two of the young blacks who came to our first camp on Coopers Creek travelled down to bring the news of the white men having come'. The magnitude of King's survival and the arrival of the relief expedition were no doubt cemented by the elaborate presentation of gifts and a dance by the "white fellows" as they have already learned to call us' (Howitt cited in Tolcher 1986, p. 37). Howitt (1907, p. 28) was convinced that 'they understood that these [gifts] were given to them for their kindness to the white men, and especially to King'.

In November and December 1860 two members of the expedition, Lyons and McPherson, had met similar life-saving generosity from resident clans at Duroadoo, also followed by a similar communication breakdown. Beckler clearly stated their rescue was due only to the bravery, skill and expertise of the expedition's Aboriginal guides, Dick and Peter. McPherson's narrative, recorded 'word by word' by Beckler (1993), revealed that they had been desperately short of provisions and unable

to find drinkable water when an Aboriginal clan rescued them. However, a breakdown in cross-cultural communications quickly escalated into confusion and mutual suspicion: 'We found a dozen natives camped. They shouted at us, "Bulla, Bulla", and made signs to us to come closer. They then took their spears and accompanied us, continually shouting "Bulla, Bulla" ... they escorted us to a deep creek which was full of good water' (Beckler 1993, p. 68). At this point Lyons gave one of the Aboriginals a 'note for Burke'. It is difficult to tell how the Aboriginals regarded this note; they may have interpreted the writing as *toa*, a means of communicating people's movements from one place to another (Kerwin 2010).<sup>5</sup> McPherson recorded how both parties became bewildered at each other's actions: 'they made signs for us to continue our march to Bulla ... and when we arrived at a creek they made signs to us that this was Bulla. They urged us to dismount, swung their clubs and sticks and grabbed at our horses' reins. We got away from them and after a short distance came to a spot where Burke had camped for a night ... The natives followed us. They wanted to force us to remain here and camp' (Beckler 1993, p. 68). Then followed a curious cultural impasse which McPherson certainly perceived as intimidating: 'About thirty of them came one by one and placed themselves directly in front of our horses. They had no spears, but behaved very violently. We were a little frightened, but nonetheless tried to free ourselves from them. We travelled onwards.' In the following two days three of the party's four horses died from exhaustion and the party, unable to locate any water or food, 'were nearly frantic'.

This is purely speculative, but given the poor nature of the country it is highly likely that the Aboriginal resistance to the party travelling onwards was a bid to stop them from perishing. Other explorers such as Eyre (Parker 2007, p. 74), Sturt (Short 2009, pp. 120–121) and Neumayer (1869, p. 33)



recorded Aboriginal people expressing deep concern for the welfare of men who intended to travel through country the Aborigines considered dangerous. The party of three (McPherson, Lyons and Dick) haltingly made their way back to Bulla and thence to Duroodoo where, like Burke, Wills and King, the white men were totally dependent on Aboriginal people training them to process nardoo for survival, while Dick made a desperate bid to reach Beckler's camp. McPherson paid homage to nardoo: 'We now live in the firm conviction that without this providential nourishment that party would never have found us still alive' (Beckler 1993, p. 75).

Allied incidents involving Aboriginal people from language groups other than those directly on the expedition routes would have widened social memories of the Burke and Wills expedition, which in time may have become blurred with Burke and Wills themselves. Foster's (1998) discussion of Aboriginal messengers noted how the role of Aboriginal message carriers for explorers such as Howitt became ritualised, the messengers coming to view paper messages as secret religious business known only to white men. 'A reminiscence of Central Australia' by Howitt (1907) told of a pair of policemen stationed at Angepina, south-west of Menindee, who were instructed to send a message to Howitt in the Cooper Creek district. The policemen took:

*the necessary measures to get through by handcuffing the Dieri blackboy to one of them at night, and the corporal told him from time to time from my [Howitt's] route plan what the country would be ahead of them, so that by and by the blackboy would say 'What name that paper yabber now?' They were three days crossing waterless country, having only a little for themselves in their waterbags. At the end of the last day, when they reached the first water at Cooper's Creek, and the blackboy had had a long and welcome drink, he said to the corporal,*

*'No blooming gammon [joking] alonga that one blooming paper!' Howitt (1907, p. 30).*

### **'Around Coopers Creek they have their traditions, amongst them being the story of Burke and Wills' (Argus 25 December 1915)**

The volume of personal and collective Aboriginal memories of the Burke and Wills expedition strongly suggests that Aboriginal people have many memory responses to the expedition. This is hardly surprising, given all the events took place on Aboriginal lands and Aboriginal peoples were pivotal in the death or survival of the white strangers on their lands (a truism not clearly acknowledged in many published accounts of the 20th century, e.g. McLaren 1959). Nugent (2006, p. 45) argued that other explorers, such as Captain Cook, have been similarly enshrined in Aboriginal public memory. He noted how Aboriginal people used colonial commemorations as occasions to stake their own historical claim to place in 'colonial historical narratives, throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century'. Some of the recorded Aboriginal memories of the Burke and Wills expedition are place-based and personally commemorative, such as those of 'Baltie' and a member of the Murtee family (Yandruwandha) who both 'always claimed to remember the Burke and Wills Expedition that camped in the land of the Yantruwantas in 1860–61' (Steel 1973, p. 6; Tolcher 1986, p. 155). Another Yandruwandha man, Danbidleli alias Jim Mariner, told Basedow in 1920 that he 'had witnessed the arrival of the Burke and Wills Expedition and subsequently helped to succour the unfortunate men when they were dying of starvation' (Tolcher 1986, p. 154). According to Basedow, Danbidleli was 'one of the few that today [1920] remain to repeat the proud legends of those who came but a generation before'. Similarly, a Cairns Post report (18 December 1950, p. 4)

claimed that 'The last link with the famous Burke and Wills expedition was Womby an aboriginal ... right to the last [1923] he remembered events that took place on that disastrous journey. Womby joined the expedition at Menindee and reached the famous depot on Cooper's creek with Brahe who left before Burke and Wills arrived'. Even in the late 1930s there were newspaper reports of elders who had very strong links with the expedition. Granny Robertson, an elder at Moonahculla, used to 'tell a story about her husband who as a fourteen year old boy helped Burke and Wills cross a river. The people still [c. early to mid 20th century] told stories about this – they had never seen a camel before' (Attwood *et al.* 1994, p. 159; *Australian Evangel*, February 1939, p. 7).

Eastman (c. 1938) noted that the 'passing of the Bourke [sic] and Wills expedition through the locality' (Bendigo) had been heavily memorialised by the Djadjawurrung people into the late 19th century. Eastman (1938, pp. 8–9) recalled that the Burke and Wills expedition was 'frequently spoken of by the Aborigines to whom the camels made great appeal'. An early 20th-century writer from the Innaminka district hinted that the Aboriginal people in the district were 'rich in memories of the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition ... The many dramatic facets of the expedition captured the imagination of the people as no other of its kind has done' (Burchill in Thallon 1966, p. 311). Burchill's observation was confirmed by an article in the *Argus* (25 December 1915) which stated that a traveller (Frances Birtles) had 'ascertained a number of fresh facts concerning the final wanderings of Burke and his comrades'. The report stated that the traveller had met some 'old aborigines' from the Innaminka area 'who recollected the advent of the explorers and who cared for King when found in the bush in a starving state'. The Aborigines' account differed markedly from King's account in several areas (later contested by a correspondent

in *The Register*): that there were four white men not three at Cooper Creek; that a camel had been bogged in a claypan and that King lived with Aboriginal people for 'some years' (p. 14). The Innamincka Aborigines also told Birtles that Grey had died upon reaching Lake Coongie and that his skull remained on the banks of the lake for many years.

Some 20 years later, other social memories of the Burke and Wills expedition appeared in the *Sunday Times* (25 April 1937), attested by an unidentified Aborigine concerning 'the deaths of several "long walk white man" who had been helped by his father's father many moons ago'. The article, '*Who was to Blame for the Tragedy of Burke and Wills?*', claimed that 'It was also proven beyond doubt that Burke had assaulted Wills striking him several blows and knocking him down.' The reporter said that the story about Burke's assault on Wills had 'drifted down from different aboriginals who had witnessed the incident'. Some confirmation was cited by Murgatroyd (2002, p. 260), who wrote that several years after the deaths of Burke and Wills 'the first cattlemen in the Cooper Creek area were told by the Yandruwandha that there had been a violent quarrel between Burke and Wills over the incident [Burke's violent rebuff of the gifts of food]. Burke struck his deputy several times, knocking him to the ground, and the two men did not talk for some time afterwards'. Lewis (2007) also uncovered an 'other' history of the Burke and Wills expedition, emanating largely from Aboriginal social memory, which challenges the official account of Burke's death. Lewis provided further evidence, interesting in light of the stockmen's story in Murgatroyd (2002), for a serious reconsideration of Burke's death: in 1875 an Aboriginal woman told a squatter her recollections of the explorer's death, caused not by starvation but by 'nother one white fellow' (Lewis 2007, p. 143). The manner of Burke's death is discussed more fully in Chapter 9.

Harnett (2011) warned that, without supporting evidence, oral history may not be

reliable; on the other hand, Rose (2003) held that Aboriginal oral history methodology needs to be viewed in the context of its cultural intent. For example, Rose's education by Aboriginal elders about Aboriginal oral history traditions led to the conclusion that the 'moral content of the [Aboriginal] stories (oral history) is equally significant as historical truthfulness' (Rose 2003, p. 123).

An article in the *Argus* (8 June 1865, republished in August 1939) provided possibly the best documentation of an Aboriginal perspective, rather than an account, of the Burke and Wills expedition. It is quoted here almost in entirety as it arguably provides one of the clearest pieces of empirical evidence that the expedition's story was as much an Aboriginal story as a non-Aboriginal story:

*A correspondent, writing to us under a late date from the Darling, on the return from a back country trip says 'after a fatiguing day's ride, I had to camp without water in a clump of mulga in an open and very exposed piece of country. During the night the wind swept through the trees, making a horrible moaning sound. I slept very little, being very thirsty, and also anxious about the horses. The blackfellow slept uneasily, and kept muttering in his sleep. Towards morning he woke and seemed relieved, as one does who has been oppressed by nightmare. "Methink", he said "Devil been walk about tonight – not devil belonging to blackfellow, but white man devil. Methink Burke and Wills cry out tonight "What for whitefellow not send horses and grub?" You hear wind? That come up from Cooper Creek. My word master, Mr Burke, Wills too, big one walk about on that creek. Never them leave Cooper Creek. Always, always, always, walk about there, and cry out 'long a Menindie "Where white man? Why another one white man no come?"' "You know", continues our correspondent, 'that this fellow is aware of all the proceedings of*

*the unfortunate Victorian expedition'. We may add, by way of explanation that the word 'spirit' is unknown to the blacks, and in this instance, no doubt, as in all others that we know of, the word 'devil' is made use of instead.*

Some contextual understanding of this account can be gleaned from 'Beliefs and practices connected with death in north-eastern and western south Australia' (Elkin 1937), which described how Aboriginal belief systems in this region stressed that death was usually caused by people who had performed some magic against them. Each individual was believed to have three souls. One was believed to linger around the grave, and could appear to a younger brother and teach him a new dance and song to be performed in the deceased's honour. The second soul went away towards the south, and the personal spirit departed to the sky where it appeared as a falling star. Elkin (1932) described the elaborate mortuary procedures and the obligations (*kupura*) incurred by death, which included the 'dying person tells his relations – members of his own matrilineal totem clan, or at least, of his own moiety – about his dreams or dreams. Thus they know who caused his death, and have a grievance against the person or clan indicated' (Elkin 1932, p. 195).

Relief expeditions such as those led by Frederick Walker in September 1861 and Landsborough (1862) questioned Aboriginal people at every opportunity about their knowledge of the Burke and Wills expedition and confirmed that many Aboriginal people were 'aware of all the proceedings of the unfortunate Victorian expedition'. McKinlay's relief expedition also questioned Aboriginal people about the whereabouts of the Burke and Wills expedition and for a time held the opinion that 'Burke and his companions had been killed by the blacks'; this belief was due to McKinlay's misunderstanding of his Aboriginal guide (Howitt 1907, p. 17). It seems very likely that Aboriginal people would have been interested in the

expedition and shared news of it – behaviour similar to that of whites at Menindee, who spoke incessantly about 'who was out and who had come in, what country they had seen ... and especially what parties had had "brushes with the niggers"' (Howitt 1907, p. 20). Several of Walker's (1863) and Landsborough's (1862) journal entries attested to a social memory of what were probably the movements of the Burke and Wills expedition:

**Saturday, 26 October 1861**

*(Walker 1863)*

*One old lady who spoke a language of which Jemmy Cargara [an Aboriginal guide] understood a little, stated that she had seen men like me many years ago down the river; pointing WSW., she said another river joined it from the south-east; this must be the Haughton. She also, in pointing WSW, repeated the words 'Caree Garee' several times.*

**Tuesday, 7 January 1862**

*(Landsborough 1862)*

*Mr. Macalister, Paddy, Cosem Jimmy and Jingle taking a day's ration with them, started to track Burke definitively for at least 10 miles. Rodney today looking for horses saw some blacks cross the river. He made them understand we were tracking four men and one horse and that the men wore hats like him. They immediately pointed east by south then west by south east ... I have never seen a country so thickly populated with blacks.*

**Saturday, 18 January 1862**

*(Landsborough 1862)*

*We showed them the picture of a camel, and tried without effect to discover where such animals, if they had seen them, had gone. I doubt whether they understood the meaning of the picture ... It is as well to mention here that this young black was trying to make us understand something relative to the four white men we inquired about, but was stopped by the sinister-looking men.*

**Monday, 20 January 1862**

*(Landsborough 1862)*

*One of them spoke a language a little of which Jemmy Cargara understood. She asked if we were the party that had gone down the Norman. Having been informed that we were, she said that nearly all the blacks had gone over to meet us, as we had said we would return that way. She said Burke had gone down the plains on the left bank, and repeatedly answered he had never returned that way.*

**Wednesday, 22 January 1862**

*(Landsborough 1862)*

*As the blacks here had confirmed the story told by the gins, of Burke having gone down the left bank, and that he had not returned by the Flinders; and as this was evidently what the blacks at camp No. 5 had tried to make us comprehend.*

**Thursday, 23 January 1862**

*(Landsborough 1862)*

*We fell in with five blacks, but there were tracks of many more. From them we got the old story about the four white men having gone down the Flinders, but, as usual, no information as to whether they had gone from there.*

An idea of how far and fast the news about the Burke and Wills expedition and the relief expeditions was relayed by Aboriginal people across South Australia and Queensland came from Howitt (1901; 1907), who was able to obtain information via inter-language communication links from a Narrinyeri<sup>6</sup> man who spoke Dieri about the relief expedition led by McKinlay, far to the north in present-day Queensland. Howitt (1907) ingratiated himself with elders so that they would 'come and bring news to me which messengers had brought them from the Yaurorka, who lived at the southern edge of Sturt's Stony Desert, who had received it from the tribe on the Diamantina River on the other side of it. This news related to John McKinlay, the explorer, who was known to the blacks by the name of "Wheelpra Pinnaru" – that is the head man



or elder with the “cart” (Howitt 1907, p. 32) (see Figure 8.3). Howitt was informed of the movements and predicaments of McKinlay’s expedition: ‘I was told at one time by my native informants that “*Wheelpra Pinnaru*” was surrounded by a great *arimata*, or flood, and could not get out; then after a time, it was that the *arimata* had gone away, and that “*Wheelpra Pinnaru*” had gone away they did not know where to, and that he had thrown his *wheelpra* away – that is, left it behind’ (Howitt 1907, p. 32). In 1901 Howitt had learnt ‘a good deal of [Yandruwandha] language’ from a Dieri guide which enabled him to make inquiries about the whereabouts of Grey’s grave. Grey was described by the Yandruwandha as a ‘warugati [emu] wiltfella [whiteman]’; as the Aborigines had no prior knowledge of camels and thus no word for it, they used the word ‘emu’ instead. Howitt was

informed that ‘wilpara pinnaru’ (McKinlay) ‘had fought with the blacks’ (Howitt 1901, p. 292). This was confirmed by the manager of Blanchwater Station in South Australia, after hearing claims by Dieri clanspeople who described the massacre by McKinlay in vivid detail (Howitt 1901, p. 296). Howitt ‘was to be remembered by the people of the Cooper for a generation or more as *Kulyumaru Pinnaru* or head man of the camp at Kullyamurra’ Tolcher (1986, p. 41).

## Conclusion

A brief review of Aboriginal oral accounts of non-Indigenous explorers during the early period of contact has revealed a less-than-flattering view – frequently jocular – and regular dismay at the culturally insensitive or unskilled behaviour displayed by whites, which Aboriginal people often found



Figure 8.3: ‘Arrival at the Stoney Desert’. Cuthbert Clark. 1861 or 1862. Lithograph, De Gruchy & Leigh. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. 30328102131801/3.



necessary to redress. It has been significantly more difficult to retrieve some notion of how Aboriginal people generally and individually may have perceived the Burke and Wills expeditions specifically, although we have been able to identify a name ascribed to Grey: 'warugati [emu] wiltfella [whiteman]'. Thankfully, there are sufficient remnants of evidence about reactions to the expedition and post-expedition memories which allow us to view the Burke and Wills saga as an Aboriginal one as much as a European one. There is much evidence of interest in each other's cultures, albeit most often as exemplars of cultural exotica from an Aboriginal perspective, particularly in relation to the camels, which were variously ascribed the status of sheep, bunyips and emus.

The moral compass of Aboriginal people towards the expedition has been particularly difficult to discern at this distance of time (and language), but there is sufficient evidence to indicate that Aboriginal peoples (particularly the Yandruwandha) faced a terrible bind – the need to assist the outsiders as per their cultural obligations and the wish to repel these men who often eschewed their advice and succour and did not follow the balance of exchange or *kupara*. The 'Yaam Corroboree song' collected by Beckler during the expedition indicates the cultural dichotomy experienced by Aboriginal guides, and provides important insights into the emotional and cultural balancing all Aboriginal people experienced when living 'two ways'. While no direct evidence has been found of an Aboriginal song or corroboree which focuses on Burke and Wills, the longevity and volume of Aboriginal traditions about the Burke and Wills story is evidence that memorialising by song and performance occurred. However, it is possible that Burke and Wills' significance to Aboriginal people occurred in response to the later waves of European settlers who frequently asked about them. The question of how to interpret the Aboriginal drover's dream and representation of Burke and Wills is difficult,

but at the very least it has exploded the notion that Aboriginal people had no role in structuring the mythology of explorers from their cultural point of view. It is also arguable that Burke and Wills may have been seen generally as a symbolic representation of white people's moral deficiency.

After this foray into charting the extent to which Aboriginal memorialisation of expeditions such as Burke and Wills occurred, it is evident that writings about Australian expeditions have been remiss about embracing Aboriginal oral traditions of exploration. Much research remains to be done to ensure a richer memorialisation occurs.

## Endnotes

- 1 According to R.H. Mathews (1904, p. 251) the belief in transmigration or reincarnation was widespread during the early years of European settlement, being 'observed in every part of Australia where investigations have been made'. One of the best-documented instances of this belief is William Buckley's, an escaped convict who was saved from the brink of death by Aborigines who called him 'Murrangurk'; he afterwards learnt it was the name of a man formerly belonging to that tribe.
- 2 According to McKnight (1969), camels were first introduced into Australia in 1840.
- 3 The term 'bunjibs' is probably a reference to 'banib' or 'bunyip', the name of a legendary animal that was greatly feared in most of south-eastern Australia (Clarke 2007).
- 4 Philip Clarke (*pers. comm.* 2012) advised against reading too much into Aboriginal terminology for introduced animals: 'For example, in many languages all large animals are known by the same term (i.e. *nanto* for "male kangaroos" and "horses" in the Kurna language of Adelaide – and there are many examples in other languages).'

- 5 Although Foster's (2008) paper suggested that Aboriginal messengers had an equivalent to white people's paper messages, the reference to *toas* as functioning something like message sticks is contentious. The objects produced at Bethesda (Killalpaninna) Mission in 1905 may have been post-European rather than pre-European objects (Jones and Sutton 1986).
- 6 The term 'Narrinyeri' is generally taken as meaning a person living at the Murray Mouth.

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# How did Burke die?

*Darrell Lewis*



## Introduction

This chapter deals with an Aboriginal woman's account of the death of Robert O'Hara Burke, recorded at Cooper Creek by a visiting squatter in 1874 (see Lewis 2007). The story of the Burke and Wills disaster is well-known and will not be discussed in detail in this chapter. The key points of relevance are that expedition member Charlie Gray died during the return trip from the Gulf of Carpentaria, and Burke and Wills officially died from deprivation and exhaustion. On the latter point the Aboriginal woman's story suggests otherwise.

## Aboriginal stories

I began recording Aboriginal oral history and other stories in 1975 when I worked with Gurindji, Bilinara and Naringman people, in the Victoria River district of the Northern

Territory. From 1980 I assisted my then wife, Deborah Rose, in recording oral traditions which formed the basis of *Hidden Histories* (Rose 1991). I also carried out much of the archival research for that book. Since then I have continued to record oral history in the Victoria River country and elsewhere, and in various capacities – on Aboriginal land claims, while documenting sacred sites, on surveys of historic sites and so on. The people I worked with were at least middle-aged, often elderly. Some had been born in and grew up in the bush. None had any formal western education. As a generalisation they were not sophisticated in the white man's ways and had been exposed to little or none of the ideas and ideologies of Aborigines engaged in national politics. Most stories were simple accounts of what happened, with no obvious political agenda.



Victoria River Aboriginal stories can be broken down into several categories. Some are not intended as literal truth as it might be understood in the western tradition. Examples are stories about the activities of Captain Cook or Ned Kelly in the Victoria River country; in the European understanding, neither man visited the region. The stories usually involve Captain Cook shooting people and establishing the new and unjust social order that Aborigines endured for much of the past century. Ned Kelly is described as friendly towards or as helping people and unsuccessfully resisting the new order. Rather than being reliable accounts of the actions of Cook or Kelly, the stories are about the moral – or rather the immoral – structure of social relations between Aborigines and Europeans, established by white society and personified in the image of the ‘founding father’, Captain Cook. These could be classed as ‘political stories’ (Rose 1984; 2001).

Stories about historical events can also deviate significantly from the ‘truth’ as revealed in historical documentation, although they always have a foundation in fact. In my experience, if a story involves an event that occurred before the storyteller’s birth, their details of that event sometimes diverge widely from European understandings of it. In this way they are no different from oral traditions in other societies around the world. Likewise, if an event occurred at some distance from the home territory of the storyteller, the details can deviate from those documented historically. Sometimes elements of two events, distant in time and space, have been combined. However, my experience also shows that if the storyteller speaks of an event in which they were directly involved, their recollection usually corresponds closely with European documentation of that event. This should not be surprising – the wonderful memories of Aborigines have been remarked upon by various people since white settlement. Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt,

for example, described the powers of memory of his two Aboriginal assistants as ‘daguerrotype’ or photographic (Leichhardt 1847, p. 118). Of course, different details may be included or omitted in each telling of the story or between different tellers, just as there will be indifferent historical records. I have never once been told a story which later proved to be a fabrication, and this brings us to the story told to the squatter in 1874.

## The squatter’s story: how Burke died

In the summer of 1874–75 a squatter made a trip to inspect some country in the Coongie Lakes area north-west of Innamincka. Soon after he returned he sent a description of his journey to the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, which published it in April 1875 in two parts, under the heading, ‘To Cooper’s Creek and back’. The name of this squatter is unknown because it was not included in the article, and archival research has not yet revealed his identity. Initially, the squatter’s party consisted of himself, three other white men and two Aborigines, one of whom was ‘a native of Cooper’s Creek’ and, we can assume, could act as an interpreter between the white men and bush people.

The squatter didn’t name his departure point, but he travelled into the region from the east via Thurgomindah and Nockatunga on the Wilson River. On reaching the Cooper he went downstream to Nappamerrie homestead, where he visited the site of Burke and Wills’ depot. Then he moved further downstream to Innamincka homestead; Aborigines living there showed him the site where Burke died. An old woman told the squatter she had been there when Burke died, and told him what she saw. The squatter paraphrased what she told him, thus her story is second-hand. It forms only a small part of the article, which is well-written, serious and straightforward. In the words of the squatter: ‘An old gin whom I spoke to recollected the explorers, and helped them to cover Burke’s body with bushes after his

death. She also affirmed that Burke had not died from starvation, but had been shot by “nother one white fellow” (Australian Town and Country Journal, 17 April 1875).

The squatter was shocked. This was not the conclusion arrived by the Committee of Inquiry into the Burke and Wills disaster: the committee had concluded that they died from exhaustion and starvation. That belief had become the official truth for white Australians generally. The squatter remarked that the woman ‘could scarcely have invented such a story, and she persisted in saying that she had actually seen a whitefellow, who answers in every way to the description of King, come behind Burke when he was stooping at the fire roasting a duck, and shoot him in the side’ (Australian Town and Country Journal, 17 April 1875).

While there can be little doubt that it was Burke who died at the site, it was the squatter who formally identified the murderer as King. Apparently he knew what King and Wills looked like and the woman provided enough detail for him to deduce that it was King who did the shooting. The squatter’s report discussed the woman’s story and his reasons for making it public rather than dismissing it as ‘just a blackfellow’s yarn’:

*After the lapse of all these years, and the death of King, against whom this fearful charge is brought, it might be considered advisable to let the matter rest; but now that the country is being quickly settled in the neighbourhood, the traditions of the blacks will become better known to white men, and this subject will therefore, sooner or later, be mooted. And it is right that King’s character should be cleared from so foul a blot, if there is no foundation for the report; while, on the other hand, if true, no one could be accused reasonably of exposing the perpetration of so dastardly a crime. Wills, however, fully exonerated his chief from this imputation, but it was notorious that both King and Gray had not very kindly feelings towards Burke, on account*

*of the latter being very strict with them on the journey (Australian Town and Country Journal, 17 April 1875, p. 22).*

The squatter stated that when King returned to Melbourne and told his story to the Committee of Inquiry, he said he had a secret about the expedition which he would take to the grave – it was generally supposed that the secret was connected with the death of Gray. There is no evidence that King said any such thing and after King died one of his rescuers said that King had told him something that he (King) made the rescuer promise to keep secret, and that it had nothing to do with Gray’s death (Welch, *The Queenslander*, 29 April 1875, p. 3). Others also believed King had a secret (Ernest Favenc, cited in McIver 1935, p. 151). The squatter clearly believed that the Aboriginal woman’s story explained that secret.

Over the following months the squatter’s story was republished, in full or in part, in other colonial newspapers (*Gippsland Times*, 6 May 1875, p. 3; *The Queenslander*, 8 May 1875, p. 7; *Brisbane Courier*, 4 May 1875, p. 3; *South Australian Register*, 8 May 1875; *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 1 May 1875, p. 2). Most focused on the the story told by the old woman: any editorial comment was strongly against the possibility of there being any truth in her account.

## Could the squatter have fabricated the story?

If the squatter did fabricate the story, we have to ask why. We might expect that squatters, generally considered to be part of the colonial ruling class, would be inclined to support the story that Burke was a good and humane leader who died a hero’s death. If this squatter shared that view, publishing the alternative story served no purpose. His stated reason for publishing was that European settlers were flooding into the Cooper Creek district and he believed the story would be told to other white men and would inevitably become public knowledge.

He was concerned that King's character should be cleared if the story was false and, if it was true, that King's 'dastardly crime' should be exposed. There is no evidence that the squatter sent his story to colonial authorities or pushed for an inquiry – no 'paper trail' for historians to find – and this suggests that the squatter told the story in good faith, for the reasons he stated.

Many historians have written about Burke and Wills but apparently only Bonyhady (1991) mentioned the Aboriginal woman's story. His source was a regional newspaper, *Southern Cross* (Junee, NSW), which repeated the story from the original and made no mention of official records. Bonyhady only stated that the story circulated; he made no assessment of it (Bonyhady 1991, p. 281).

The squatter, a newcomer to the region, would not have understood the local language so he must have communicated with the woman either directly or indirectly in Aboriginal English. Aborigines in the region probably began to learn English from King when he lived among them in 1861. Some would have learnt more from A.W. Howitt's expedition, which spent many months on Cooper Creek in 1861–62. By the time the squatter arrived in late 1874 some local Aborigines could have been in sustained contact with settlers on the northern, southern and eastern fringes of the region for at least seven years, and at Innamincka for up to four years (Tolcher 1997, p. 22). At more distant stations, some Aborigines may have had even longer contact – about 100 km downstream from Innamincka, the squatter met an Aboriginal man from Lake Hope, a station 150 km to the south that was settled by 1859, who 'could speak English well'. In any case, it is evident that some had learnt enough English for effective communication because one of the squatter's Aboriginal guides was 'a native of Coopers Creek'. The squatter was unlikely to have employed him unless the Aborigine was familiar enough with English to understand and obey orders, and to act as an interpreter.

My decades of experience working with Northern Territory Aborigines have shown the difficulties and misunderstandings that can arise when Aboriginal English is used or if leading questions are asked. If the squatter somehow misunderstood the woman's initial statement, the misunderstanding should have been cleared up: after hearing her 'startling' account he said he questioned her closely but she 'persisted' in saying that she had seen one man shoot the other. The fact that in the face of close questioning the woman persistently told the same version of events suggests that she was telling the truth as she knew it.

### Could the woman have incorrectly remembered the events?

The Aborigines' wonderful capacity for memory was mentioned above, a capacity often remarked upon by early Europeans and well-known by anthropologists and others who work with Aborigines. The arrival of the Burke and Wills expedition in the Cooper Creek country, the great size of their horses and camels, the presence of some expedition members at the Cooper Creek depot for four months, their use of firearms, the deaths of Burke and Wills and King's survival with the Aborigines for several months afterwards, and the arrival of Howitt's and McKinlay's search parties with more horses and camels, were major events in the lives of local Aborigines. The events were still very well-remembered in the mid-1880s as 'red-letter days' (Kenny 1920).

It was noted earlier that Aboriginal oral history accounts from the 'early days' (usually before the storyteller was born) sometimes contain elements from two separate events, whereas stories from the teller's personal experience almost always closely conform with, and complement, European documentation of the same events. I believe it is highly unlikely that Burke's death from starvation, witnessed or otherwise, could be transformed into death by shooting in the space of 13 years.

## Did the woman fabricate her story?

As the squatter noted, it is difficult to imagine why she would have done so. Even in the unlikely event that an early settler had told her about the controversy that raged around Burke's leadership and his alleged mistreatment of some of his men, it is highly improbable that the woman would have concocted a story in which Burke was shot. The squatter claimed that he questioned her carefully. If he asked a leading question and she gave him the answers she thought he wanted to hear, it is unlikely that she would have stuck to a story she invented to please or satisfy him.

## Could the story relate to an unknown event involving people other than Burke and King?

There were other white people in the region before and after Burke and Wills, and before European settlement. The best-known of those who came before Burke and Wills was the expedition led by Gregory in search of traces of Ludwig Leichhardt in 1858, but there were others. In the summer of 1859–60 two squatters, McDonald and Hack, came from the south and spent some time in the Coongie Lakes area, north-west of the present town of Innamincka. In December 1860 two stockmen, exploring out of curiosity to see the country, were reported to have perished in 'Sturt's desert'.

If there were an unknown expedition in the same region, if one member of it shot another and even if the (hypothetical) unknown expedition were in the region before Burke and Wills, the time between the alleged shooting and the story being told to the squatter would still be relatively short. It would be within the lifetime of a person who was 'old' in 1874, so there is little possibility that two separate stories were conflated. Even if the woman's story were a conflation of different events, it would be remarkable if both events occurred at the place where Burke died.

Anyone who has worked with Aboriginal people in their tribal area knows that their knowledge of their country, and places in their country, is extraordinarily reliable. If the woman's story of one man shooting another referred to a different party at a different place it is inconceivable that she would have confused one place with another. Burke and Wills found no evidence that another party of white men had preceded them along Cooper Creek, and the local Aborigines apparently made no mention of other whites or a grave.

While Howitt was based at Cooper Creek for months in 1861–62, waiting for McKinlay and Walker to arrive, he questioned local Aborigines about expeditions in the area before Burke and Wills. They gave detailed descriptions of the movements of Burke and Wills, and of Sturt, but had no knowledge of any other expedition (Howitt's journal 1861, p. 11).

## What reliance can be placed on the story?

First, as the squatter noted, the woman had no reason to make it up. It is difficult to believe that such a story would even have occurred to her. Second, the woman provided a detailed story. Rather than a bland 'One white fellow bin shoot nother one white fellow', she said that one man was stooping over a fire to cook a duck and the other man came from behind and shot him in the side. I believe that these additional details add to the likelihood that her story was factual. Third, the events she described occurred only 13–14 years earlier and she claimed to have witnessed them. She was described by the squatter as an 'old gin', so she almost certainly was an adult at the time of Burke's death, rather than a child who might not have clearly understood what she had seen. One newspaper editor sought to denigrate the story by describing it as 'garrulous nonsense uttered by an old black gin' (*Gippsland Times*, 29 April 1875, p. 2). Another editor described the woman as 'a

garrulous old woman, who may have been in her dotage, or have been demented, or, whose imagination may have been excited through an indulgence in the intoxicating mixture, which is made and chewed, by the Cooper's Creek blacks' (*Bendigo Advertiser*, reproduced in the *Gippsland Times*, 6 May 1875, p. 3).

After he was rescued King was reluctant to talk about events on the Cooper or found it difficult to do so without showing signs of emotional distress. This was usually attributed to his quiet, shy nature and the events being too painful to relive. Quite possibly this was the case. At times during King's return journey from Cooper Creek, he found the intense public interest impossible to face. However, we should consider the possibility that his reticence was at least partly the result of a guilty conscience, perhaps extreme remorse and fear of discovery. If King were guilty of murder it certainly was in his interest to promote a public version of events which hailed Burke as a hero who died of starvation, and to feign mental distress whenever he was questioned.

## Would King have had reason to shoot Burke?

The answer is probably 'yes'. The squatter noted that 'it was notorious that both King and Gray had not very kindly feelings towards Burke, on account of the latter being very strict with them on the journey' (*Australian Town and Country Journal*, 17 May 1875, p. 22). Bonyhady (1991) also showed Burke to be an authoritarian leader, who could be cruel to men he had come to dislike. Although King's public statements about the expedition were always supportive of Burke, Bonyhady noted there was hearsay evidence which suggested that, at Cooper Creek, King told at least one rescuer that when Gray was discovered stealing food, Burke had 'knocked down, kicked, and so ill-used' him that he (King) 'would have shot the leader, if he had had a pistol; and that poor Gray was never afterwards allowed

to have his meals with the others'. He was also reported as saying that a day or so before Gray died, he had been 'thrashed unmercifully by Burke' (Bonyhady 1991, pp. 97–112, 204–230; Varndell, *South Australian Register*, 27 December 1862, p. 2).

## Burke's death according to King's neighbour

After the squatter's story became public, another account of Burke being shot appeared. It came from an unnamed resident of Sale, Victoria, who claimed to have been a neighbour of King's after King returned to Melbourne. According to this account, King said that 'Burke and Wills had a quarrel, while the whole company was starving, and that Burke drew a revolver and shot Wills in the shoulder. He fell, but immediately sprang up again and fired at Burke, shooting him in the side' (*Launceston Examiner*, 8 May 1875, p. 2, republished from the *Gippsland Mercury*).

The existence of tension between Burke and Wills finds some support in the reminiscences of a drover, George McIver, published in 1935. McIver drove sheep to newly established western Queensland stations in the 1870s and worked in the north-eastern South Australia–western Queensland region for some years. His reminiscences stated that he was told by Aborigines that 'about fifteen miles below where Strzelecki Creek emerges from the great lagoon, near Innamincka', a quarrel took place between Burke and Wills. This led to a fistfight during which Burke knocked Wills down. McIver said he questioned other Aborigines about the incident, and each told the same story. Later he discovered that white stockmen in the region had heard the story and were inclined to believe it (McIver 1935, pp. 150–151).

The similarities between the neighbour's story and that of the Aboriginal woman are obvious. The main difference is that the woman provided a description of the shooter which the squatter said matched that of King, rather than Wills. The squatter may have



been wrong, but the neighbour's story that it was Wills who shot Burke can easily be explained as King's way of telling the truth about the manner of Burke's death, without implicating himself. It could be said that King's neighbour invented the story after reading the account of the Aboriginal woman, but why would they implicate Wills rather than King? Whether the shooter was Wills or King, the similarity in both stories that Burke was shot 'in the side' is astonishing, and gives greater credence to the claim that Burke died from a gunshot wound.

## Discussion

If Burke had been shot, when King took Howitt and his men to Burke's remains wouldn't someone have seen the bullet hole? When Howitt first saw Burke's body it had been moved some feet from where it originally lay, probably by wild dogs. Only the larger bones remained – there were no hand or foot bones – so there was no chance of seeing a bullet wound in the flesh (Howitt's journal, *Argus*, 4 November 1861, p. 6). If a flattened bullet had been found lodged in a bone that would have been clear evidence of foul play, but no such embedded slug was discovered.

One circumstance against accepting the story that Burke died from a gunshot wound is that none of the settlers in the region reported hearing the story. The squatter who reported the Aboriginal woman's account believed it inevitable that other whites in the Cooper country would hear the story, but there's no evidence that this happened. John Conrick pioneered Nappamerrie Station in 1873 and spent 50 years in the region. He undoubtedly heard a lot about Burke and Wills from local Aborigines, but in a series of articles he wrote in 1908 he made no mention of an Aboriginal story that Burke had been shot ('Burke and Wills revisited', *Adelaide Observer*, 21 March 1908, reproduced in the Stockman's Hall of Fame paper, June 2003). In about 1885 Herbert Kenny became the manager of Innamincka

Station. As a boy he had seen the Burke and Wills expedition leave Melbourne and thus had a particular interest in the story. He often talked about Burke and Wills with local Aborigines. Like Conrick, he made no mention of a story that Burke had been shot (Kenny, *Cumberland Argus*, 19 May 1920).

Even William Howitt, who, in 1861–62, spent many months at Cooper Creek and established friendly relations with local Aborigines, was never told anything about Burke being shot. When he read the squatter's account in 1874 he wrote a dismissive letter to his local newspaper (*Gippsland Times*, 25 May 1875, p. 4). Nevertheless, it is possible that some Aborigines knew the story. At Cooper Creek, when Howitt asked the Aborigines about white people in the region they told him about Burke and Wills and about Sturt's expedition, but apparently said nothing about the visits of Gregory in 1858 and of McDonald and Hack in 1859–60. In other words, in spite of his questions they almost certainly had information which they didn't mention to Howitt, so it is possible that they also neglected to mention that Burke had been shot.

Conrick, Kenny or others may have heard the story that Burke had been shot but dismissed it in favour of the official version. Alternatively, maybe the 'old gin' and any others who witnessed the shooting did not live long after the squatter's visit in 1874–75. Aborigines who were very young or not present at the time, or who were born after the deaths of Burke and Wills, could have adopted the 'standard' European version of events.

Another potential problem with the Aboriginal woman's story is the final entry in Burke's notebook. According to King, as Burke lay dying he made entries in a notebook and gave it to King with the request that if King survived he should pass it on to the president of the Exploration Committee, Sir William Stawell. When the notebook was examined by Stawell and the Expedition Committee none of the entries said anything

about Burke being shot, either by King or by Wills. In fact, the final entry praised King, saying that he had 'behaved nobly' and expressing the hope that he would be cared for and rewarded.

This entry seemed to be a problem. If Burke wrote it as he lay dying, as King claimed, he is unlikely to have written it after being shot by King! There is, of course, no way of knowing exactly when the note was written: Burke may have done so before he was shot. Another possibility is that King shot Burke then fabricated the entry to provide himself with cover and perhaps to ensure favourable treatment by the Expedition Committee.

I believe the idea of fabrication is unlikely, but should note the novel *Burke's Soldier* (Attwood 2003), the story of the Burke and Wills expedition from King's point of view. Attwood devised a scenario similar to that suggested here – that King forged the note after Burke died. Although much of Attwood's book was based upon historical documents, this part of his book was a work of conjecture. However, Attwood later went to an exhibition about Burke and Wills where samples of Burke's and King's handwriting were displayed side by side. He was struck by their similarity and, in the explanatory notes at the end of the novel, stated that 'what had been conjecture on my part suddenly didn't seem so fantastic' (Attwood 2003, pp. 434–441, 449). Samples of Burke's and King's handwriting are reproduced in Bonyhady (1991, p. 126). These look much more alike than different and it is not difficult to imagine that if King did forge the entry it would pass as Burke's writing.

## Conclusion

Clearly, there are pros and cons to the woman's story. Perhaps the major objection to accepting it is that neither Howitt nor any local white settlers are known to have heard about it. The entry in Burke's notebook praising King is another. I have suggested reasons to reject, or at least delay

acceptance of, both objections. The fact that Aboriginal people's recollections of personal experiences are almost always accurate supports acceptance of the woman's story. In the face of all objections to the story, there are a couple of points I cannot resolve. How and why did this story occur to the woman? Why did she stick to it in the face of persistent questioning?

There can be little doubt that the investigation of the Burke and Wills disaster was a whitewash. Some members of the investigating committee were men who had organised the expedition and were probably keen to avoid personal embarrassment. This whitewash might not apply to the death of Burke – the only evidence for the circumstances came from the only known eyewitness, John King. However, there might have another eyewitness – the Aboriginal woman whose story is diametrically different. Until further evidence comes to light the circumstances surrounding Burke's death will remain unresolved. However, I believe that equal weight should be given to the possibility that Burke died from a gunshot as to the official story of his death through illness and starvation.<sup>1</sup>

## Endnote

- 1 Coroner Dr Jane Hendtlass considered this issue in the July 2011 mock coronial inquest into the deaths of Robert O'Hara Burke, William John Wills, and Charles Gray. Hendtlass (2012, pp. 24–25) presented the following finding on the question 'Was Mr Burke murdered by Mr King?'

### Was Mr Burke murdered by Mr King?

During 1862–63, Mr Howitt went to Cooper Creek to exhume the bodies of Mr Burke and Mr Wills. After their return to Melbourne, they were laid in state in the Royal Society of Victoria. On 21 January 1863, they were buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery. Although the bodies were examined by Dr McKenna and Dr

Gilbey, there is no evidence that there was any pathological investigation to identify factors which may have contributed to their deaths.

However, in April 1875, the *Town and Country Journal* published a report from an unnamed squatter in Junee which challenged the existing story about Mr Burke's death. In his report, the squatter claimed to have visited the Innamincka homestead where Mr Burke died. While he was there, an Aboriginal woman told him that she had been present when Mr Burke died and that she had helped to cover his body with bushes. The startling part of her report is that the Aboriginal woman also claimed that another white person had shot Mr Burke while he was cooking a duck over a fire. The Aboriginal woman did not name Mr King but she described the white man in a way that the squatter knew was consistent with Mr King's physical attributes.

There were no other known witnesses of what occurred between Mr Burke and Mr King after they left Mr Wills to die. However, the unnamed squatter's allegations are supported by the accuracy of the other facts he says the Aboriginal woman told him surrounding Mr Burke's death including:

- Mr Howitt found his body under bushes.
- The exploration team returned to Cooper Creek on the same day as the support team left.
- Mr Burke had poor relationships with both Mr King and Mr Gray during the trip. This has been attributed to Mr Burke's perception that they were socially inferior and his use of physical violence against them.

Further,

- Mr King and Mr Burke were both deficient in thiamine and this will have affected their mental state.
- Mr King told the Exploration Committee he retained a secret about Mr Burke's death

that he would not disclose.

- Mr King told the Commission of Enquiry that he heard Mr Wills fire his gun before he died. There is no record that any of the bodies sustained a gunshot.
- Mr King would not talk to the media about the Exploration after 1863.
- Mr King is known to have been a good shot and shot birds for food during the trip.
- George McIver reported that Aboriginal witnesses reported to him that there was a quarrel and fight between Mr Burke and Mr Wills. He says that Mr Burke struck Mr Wills several times and knocked him down when they were about 15 miles below where the Strzelecki Creek emerges near Innamincka and not far from where Mr Wills died.
- Mr King is alleged to have told his neighbours in Melbourne that Burke and Wills quarreled and Burke shot Wills in the shoulder. He said Mr Wills grabbed the gun and shot Mr Burke in the side.
- After Mr Burke assaulted Mr Gray, Mr King said '*If I had a gun I would have shot him*'.

However, evidence against the argument that Mr King shot Mr Burke includes the following:

- Mr Burke appointed Mr King in charge of the camels after Mr Landells resigned.
- Mr King also had plenty of opportunities to leave the Exploring Expedition earlier in its history if he felt antagonistic to Mr Burke.
- No one other than the unnamed squatter is known to have heard or reported the story that Mr Burke was shot by either Mr King or Mr Wills. He was accompanied by three other Caucasian men and two Aboriginal men but none of them seems to have corroborated the story.
- It is inconsistent with the notes praising Mr King which was allegedly written by Mr Burke on 26 June 1861 when he knew he was about to die.

- The Aboriginal woman who told the story may have interpreted her observations from the spectrum of her experience. In particular, her perception that Mr King killed Mr Burke may have reflected her cultural beliefs.
- It is also possible that, if there was violence involved in the deaths of Mr Burke and Mr Wills, this did not involve Mr King.

Therefore, applying the presumption that Mr King is innocent of this serious crime, the current evidence does not reach the level of proof required for me to make a finding that he killed Mr Burke.

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# Telling and retelling national narratives

*Deirdre Slattery*



Myth shapes the way a culture sees itself and hence influences its practices. Among mythic narratives about Australian culture, the Burke and Wills expedition is well-known and often argued over in discussion of national identity. But an enduring concentration on the expedition's heroic and tragic meaning has overshadowed other interpretations of the events – those that focus on relationships with the land and its indigenous people. For well over 100 years, accounts of Burke and Wills have repeated the colonial values of conquest and control.

These accounts have been the subject of several revised analyses over the last 30 years. But despite the existence of such alternative ways of thinking, attitudes in Outdoor Education and associated outdoor activities continue to reflect traditional practices and reinforce colonial expectations of the land. Uncritical acceptance of the

value of 'exploration' inhibits development of a more robust set of relationships with both traditional owners and the land itself, one founded on realities rather than myth. This chapter examines recent retellings of the Burke and Wills story to show how alternative stories and models about the traditional owners and the land itself have been derived from the events and how they could influence different kinds of relationship with the land.

## Telling and retelling national narratives

The story of crossing of the continent in 1860–61 by the Victorian Exploring Expedition (popularly known as the Burke and Wills expedition) has been prominent among Australians' stories about themselves. The story lends itself to debate – about styles



of leadership, the nature of success and failure; differing views of qualities such as courage and heroism, loyalty and obedience; the skills needed to 'explore' the continent; the place of chance and coincidence; and the 'nature' of Australia away from the coastal fringe: merciless or benign but always capricious. Australians' interest in the Burke and Wills story lies in its potential for interpretation, argument and judgement. Such stories are not just about fact: they take on the dimensions of myth, of imaginative engagement in events that is used to support wider assumptions about national values or identity (Ascherson 2002). Once accepted, mythical interpretations can become more powerful than fact in shaping values, identity and hence behaviour.

Mythical interpretations arise from research and analysis on selected issues. Once accepted as central, these arguments can reduce interest in or knowledge of stories that make different assumptions about what is significant or important, a point frequently made in the recent publication *Burke and Wills: The Scientific Legacy of the Victorian Exploring Expedition* (Joyce and McCann 2011). The volume begins by stating that an assessment of the scientific purposes of the expedition was 'long overdue' after 150 years (Thorne 2011, p. vi)!

Historically, accounts of the expedition have been selective about the contrasting roles and modes of life of European and Indigenous people in 'the bush'. This chapter will focus on how and why this has been so. I argue that some recent authors who have revisited material about the expedition have opened up a more complex reality than that presented by colonial interpretations of the previous 100 years. They have been able to reveal neglected insights, overlooked encounters and relationships, missed opportunities and effaced commitments. These recent revisions of commonly accepted ideas offer new ways of seeing and relating to Australian nature and its traditional owners.

In reflecting on how the dominant myths about colonial exploration have influenced accepted practices and attitudes to the detriment of other possibilities I use my own field, Outdoor Education.

Myth-making necessarily involves selectivity: choice of and emphasis on some interpretations and elements of the story, neglect of others. The Burke and Wills story engages us in the major narrative about heroism and tragedy that emerged immediately after the disaster, although it was not universally accepted at the time (Hadwen 2012; Bonyhady 1991). Prompted by the media, especially the Melbourne newspaper the *Argus*, and supported by the Royal Society of Victoria which was anxious to avoid blame or negative views of its expedition, that view showed the expedition as a 'success' involving the pre-eminent achievement of the officers and leaders, Burke and Wills (Bonyhady 1991, pp. 205–213). It overshadowed King and Gray's role as merely the 'men' who contributed through obedience. King was even belittled by the *Argus*, on the grounds that his endurance was a mere physical accident, not to be compared with the moral heroism of his leaders (Bonyhady 1991, p. 207). Suffering and death in leadership was evidence of superior experience, and the deaths of four other European members of the party were ignored. Only one journey was considered in this evaluation, even though in effect there were at least three by the time Burke had split his party twice.

At least two Aboriginal guides, Peter and Dick, did not feature in these accounts even as participants in the so-called supply party. On one occasion Dick saved the lives of two expedition members, Lyons and McPherson (Bonyhady 1991, pp. 147–150), but although Dick's courage, humanity and capacity for endurance were comparable with Burke's, this event has been rarely heard of. The expedition was a 'success' because it achieved the narrowly defined goal of Burke's journey, almost regardless (or perhaps

because of) the cost in human or financial terms or the value of achieving that goal in the first place. This view of success ignored achievement for other important goals: knowledge and appreciation of the place that was 'explored' and of its people.

### *Reactions to the events*

In the years that followed, this view became entrenched in public memorialising across Victoria. Grand monuments and portentous artworks by Scott, Short, Strutt and Summers reinforced it by variously omitting Gray and/or King, aggrandising Burke's stature, incorporating the Aborigines only as attendant admirers of the dying heroes, dramatising and glorifying scenes of the explorers in a quasi-religious manner in which the Australian bush is depicted as

hell (see Figure 10.1). Longstaff's massive canvas depicting the scene of the return to the Dig tree, commissioned in 1902 by the National Gallery of Victoria, enshrined an enduring image of the explorers trapped in a wasteland, betrayed by lack of loyalty.

As described by Bonyhady (1991, p. 287), public interest in the Burke and Wills story died down by World War I. For a generation its mythical qualities were nurtured mainly by teachers, who seem to have embedded explorers as heroes in the curriculum. The story was presented in standard school texts as a tragic but necessary event in colonial progress and achievement (Long 1903). The Scouting movement, in search of Australian paradigms, also kept the story alive, celebrating Burke and Wills as 'pioneer scouts', illustrating the virtues of 'self-



*Figure 10.1:* 'Natives discovering the Body of William John Wills, the Explorer, at Coopers Creek, June 1861'. 1862 or 1864. Eugene Montagu Scott. Oil on canvas. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H6694.

sacrifice, chivalry, courage, good temper, and cheeriness' (Bonyhady 1991, p. 283).

This material was seen by generations of school children as incontestable but deadly dull; for the Scouts, the ANZAC Gallipoli campaign then offered a more immediate exemplar of the sought-after qualities (Bonyhady 1991, pp. 284–287; Hadwen 2012, p. 545). It was only when highly influential accounts emerged (Clune 1981 [first published 1937]; Moorehead 1963) that the story again became popular between the 1930s and the 1970s. Clune's account is noteworthy in that it was the only readily accessible account from 1937 until the 1960s, when it was joined by Moorehead's well-regarded saga. Both strongly reinforced the tragic/heroic narrative myth of the expedition aftermath. These semi-fictionalised accounts often blurred fact and interpretation, a tendency that could be overlooked by enthusiastic readers.

## Myth-making

Both authors used populist ideas to appeal to their readers. Clune wrote in a pre-television era when men, in particular, read for entertainment and vicarious adventure. He was very keen to contribute to 'history' and to use it as a basis for national identity and pride (Croft 2011). He claimed to set the record straight, implying that explorers' tales were 'epics of fortitude and heroic endeavour which have made Australia a nation ... They died, but the Heart of a Continent lived' (Clune 1981, pp. 173, 182). Clune's (1981, p. 14) catering to an adventure-loving audience involved close concentration on some virtues: courage, loyalty, obedience and endurance. He centred his story and moral justification on Burke, a 'hero' from the start. Wills, to a lesser extent, earned Clune's admiration for his unquestioning loyalty. Others, especially Beckler and Becker, were dismissed summarily. Wills was 'the only true scientist' (Clune 1981, p. 21), although no explanation was offered for that conclusion. In this schema, the traditional owners

were a shadowy presence, occasionally and unpredictably emerging from 'nature' to impede or assist the purposes of the explorers. However, even they were moved by the sight of the dead Burke: 'The Stone Age men, women and children wept bitterly and strewed bushes on a Captain of Hussars' (Clune 1981, p. 175).

Moorehead in particular saw Australian nature as an independent and unknowable entity, reinforcing the view that central Australia was 'the ghastly blank' (*Argus*, 1 September 1858, p. 4) where nature was unnatural. He presented the landscape much as Burke would have seen it: like a Greek god, dangerous, indifferent or aggressive, a wilful and temperamental element in human affairs. He was outraged at its injustice. He allowed that the two near misses between the Gulf party and Brahe at the Cooper Creek depot were unfortunate but 'comprehensible twists of fate', and reserved his severest judgement for nature: 'But this remorseless hostility of the land itself was unfair, perversely and unnaturally so' (Moorehead 1963, p. 121). Nature was to blame for the explorers' failure to find a way through the maze of anabranches on Cooper Creek:

*Perhaps if rain had fallen they might have got through, but as things were they went on and on and there was nothing before them on the empty horizon, not a tree, not a sign of water ... Even across a gap of a hundred years it is difficult not to feel indignant. Surely they might have been allowed, if not success, at least a little respite: a shower of rain, a pigeon ... just one whisper of hope instead of this endless implacable rejection (Moorehead 1963, p. 121).*

## Early myth-makers and their view of Aborigines

Both Clune and Moorehead saw the journey as part of a story of conquest and control, part of the dominant progress ideals of their day. They accepted and traded on their readers' acceptance of European-derived

assumptions about 'useful' and 'useless' land, about the superior qualities of civilisation, about racial hierarchy. Both were highly influential for at least a generation. Clune sold over 100 000 copies by 1957 (Bonyhady 1991, p. 297) and Moorehead's book was set reading for Matriculation English Expression in Victoria for many years (Bonyhady 1991, p. 304).

Both Clune and Moorehead were casually racist, Clune referring to Aborigines as 'blacks' or 'abos' throughout, and Moorehead using terms such as 'childlike', 'like boys', 'jabbering'. Aboriginal behaviour was either hostile or pathetically innocent. Their kindness and practical help at the end of the journey was seen as due recognition for the explorers' heroism, not as simple humanity. Clune (1981, p. 70) did admit that the Aborigines prospered in a country where his heroes died, but took refuge in a patronising joke: the Aborigines 'amused themselves by the age-old Australian pastime of watching the other bloke work'. Ironically, this observation inadvertently promoted the Yandruwandha to a central place in Australian culture, though not a desirable one.

Moorehead (1963, p. 1) offered the standard 1960s view of Australian settlement: the continent was 'absolutely untouched and unknown', empty 'except for the blacks, the most retarded people on earth'. Yet he also noted that those same people were dispersed across the continent, everywhere living healthy lives in close proximity to the dying explorers. In the 1960s, understanding of the Indigenous presence was on the cusp of change prompted by both scientific and political recognition of their long occupancy, intimate knowledge of land and rights to it. Possibly in tune with this cultural transition Moorehead also had a moment of imaginative insight, observing that 'the Coopers Creek blacks had again caught sight of these incredible bearded white men who dragged themselves along on their aimless

journeys as though bewitched by some fetish' (Moorehead 1963, p. 93). The cover of Moorehead's book featured this alternative perspective: Sidney Nolan's critical view of Burke was a powerful departure from those of Strutt, Summers and Longstaff. In later paintings of the expedition, Nolan showed the explorers even more decisively as half-crazed victims of their single-minded vision, weirdly out-of-place figures journeying and dying in an empty landscape that suggested a matching inner emptiness. The obvious fact that the Aborigines lived with relative ease in a land so murderous to the European conquerors was beginning to pose questions about cultural realities.

The striking feature of Clune's and Moorehead's accounts of both Australian nature and the Aborigines' culture within it is that they virtually ignored contradictions in their own stories. Both noted the appearances and disappearances of Aboriginal groups to the expedition as if they were random, rather than a response to resources or otherwise determined by a life independent of the explorers. They wrote of the Aborigines' behaviour as at the same time noble but untrustworthy, primitive but capable, hospitable yet unaccountably aggressive. The Aborigines' apparent swings from friendliness or helpfulness to hostility and resistance were mere switches of mood or location, not the product, as they probably were, of concern over water or food availability, the need to use ceremonial places or legitimate annoyance at the exploring party's indifference to some basic courtesies such as acknowledgement of 'country'.

Clune and Moorehead almost incidentally noted differences of response within the exploring party, but seemed unable to reflect on any cultural conclusions to be drawn from those different approaches. Both commented that Burke and his party appeared to have gone by the notable (and sacred) gorges at Mootwingee 'almost with a shudder' (Moorehead 1963, p. 60) whereas



'Becker would have delighted in all this' and both Becker and Beckler were intrigued and curious at the diversity and abundance of the oasis. Both authors casually noted that some people have the capacity to see differently, to change and learn. In their extremity, as they wandered endlessly and hopelessly along the outlets of Cooper Creek, Wills and King began to observe and even attempted to learn from the Yandruwandha. Wills began a list of words, King communicated over food-gathering and shelter. But Burke fired shots at their helpers until his end. Clune did not seem to know what to make of his own note of Wills' and King's burgeoning open-mindedness, attributing it to Wills' scientific training and King's knowledge of 'black men' from India.

That Howitt was able to easily negotiate the country that had been so pitiless to Burke was impossible to ignore; indeed, Moorehead clearly admired Howitt as a model of bush skills, interestingly noting that Howitt's open-minded attitude overturned relationships with both Aborigines and nature:

*[Howitt] was full of curiosity and vigour, everything on the Cooper fascinated him, the tribesmen, the rocks and plants, the meteors that kept trailing sparks through the night sky. He moved easily and confidently through this primeval world, and he possessed a quality that is very much lacking in the determined, embattled world of the Australian explorers – a touch of humour. There was no disagreement in his camp, he was very much the leader, and because of his knowledge of the bush, they were all eating and living well. The condition of the horses and the camels had actually improved since they left the Darling. All at once the dark threatening atmosphere of the Cooper is lifted, and this is now a place where white men can live in safety and look at the scene around them rather than at themselves (Moorehead 1963, p. 150).*

The tone attributed Howitt's apparent capacity to live well in the bush and learn from the traditional owners as almost a personal accident, a social and intellectual foible that didn't reflect on Burke.

### *Contesting the Burke and Wills myth*

Even from earliest times there were serious cracks in the façade of accepted success for the dominant values. For almost a century these questions were kept at bay by various forms of cultural blindness, such as those of Clune and Moorehead. Cultural and historical fashion can be very flexible in accommodating such blindness. Maria Nugent (2006) described how commemoration of historical events can appear to acknowledge Indigenous involvement while actually obscuring the truth (of dispossession, for example) in relation to the events being memorialised.

Some research has added detail to coverage of traditional issues, tending to reinforce dominant values. These included the mixed and confused rationale for the journey (Murgatroyd 2002; Phoenix 2012); the choice of leader and Burke's capacity to lead (Murgatroyd 2002); interpretations of the route followed (Bergin 1981; Leahy 2011); Burke's treatment of Gray and the mystery of Gray's burial place (Corke 1994); the nature of Burke's death and of King's survival (Lewis 2007); the varying levels of culpability of the Royal Society and others, even Beckler (Fitzpatrick 1961–63; Pearn 2012); and whether the expedition was a tragedy or an expensive mistake (Hadwen 2012). There has also been material on less-analysed aspects of the expedition as a colonial enterprise: the lack of medical knowledge (Pearn 2012), and the various relief expeditions and their achievements (McCourt 2012; Gibson 2012).

Only recently have other versions of the Burke and Wills myth challenged the elements that dominated from the 1860s until the 1980s, and offered other ways of relating to Australia for the 21st century. The view that recently attracted attention is that



colonial culture could have taken different paths, approaches or ideals in engaging with Australian nature and people. Such accounts included previously unpublished material by Tipping (1979) and Beckler (1993); academic analyses by Reynolds (1980), Bonyhady (1991), Murgatroyd (2002) and Allen (2011); and fictionalised history by Attwood (2003) and Edmond (2009). These versions focused on the story as opportunity lost, or emphasised previously ignored or undervalued experiences and achievements made through other approaches to exploration and discovery. Tipping's beautiful presentation of Becker's art and diary showed the lasting value of the scientific and humanist perspective in his descriptions, paintings and drawings of nature and of the Aborigines. A translation of Beckler's diary was published for the first time in English as recently as 1993; it offered a view of the wonders of nature Beckler found in the midst of his own quiet heroism and unselfish attempts to look after dying members of Wright's party.

Reynolds (1980, p. 214) was clear that 'European settlers did not tame a wilderness but turned a usurped land to new uses. While they explored its surface and tested its potential, they were highly dependent on Aboriginal expertise'. He saw this recognition as adding new significance to a well-worn pathway. Bonyhady's (1991) detailed account focused on the role of the story in the national consciousness and identity. Murgatroyd (2002) emphasised the entrepreneurial motivation for colonial acquisition of new territory and land opportunities as a reason for Burke's irrational haste. She also noted Burke's basic hostility to the land and the Aborigines, seeing his blindness on such matters as ultimately part of his tragedy (and that of others). Attwood's (2003) fictionalised retelling of King's story reflected on the events as seen by the underdog. It was also highly critical of the expedition's cultural (as well as geographical and organisational)

blind spots through Howitt's persona. Edmond (2009) resurrected Becker's tragic story, offering it as an exploration of what the artistic imagination can achieve. A recent edited collection (Joyce and McCann 2011) offered comprehensive accounts of the scientific legacy of both the expedition and its various rescue parties by experts in a range of disciplines. Notable was Allen's careful documentation that the land was Aboriginal space and place (Allen 2011), something that was clear even to the partial and often erratic gaze of the explorers.

All these authors looked at the Aborigines' role differently: in describing Becker and Beckler's scientific and artistic interests and activities, they noted their acute interest and appreciation in the setting and the local people. They acknowledged the presence of Aborigines as members of the expedition, or as path-finders. They gave credit to the Aboriginal Dick's gallant rescue of McPherson and Lyons, and noted how Becker, Howitt and King used the exceptional opportunity to observe and learn from the Aborigines. They also explained the Aborigines' attitudes to the explorers as valid responses to uninvited, dominating, ignorant and discourteous intruders.

These authors were motivated by their belief that the lesser-known explorers and indigenous peoples offered personal qualities, observations, perceptions and skills that were given scant attention at the time but that could have encouraged a mythology that celebrated a different kind of experience, one that encouraged a more positive relationship between cultures and to places than the threatening and hostile 'ghastly blank' and futile courage of the earlier accounts. Unencumbered by the need to glorify conquest or self-destruction, these writers saw Burke's leadership as a sad and wasted opportunity.

Murgatroyd (2002) and Attwood (2003) considered Howitt's methods to show how 'hostility' emerged from the mind of the explorer rather than from the intrinsic

situation. These authors focused on Howitt's relationships with landscape and people: his own party and the Aborigines. In catching the train to Bendigo then the stage coach to Swan Hill to begin his rescue mission, Howitt exemplified economy of style (and a sense of modern-day political correctness) that gave him the time and energy to be curious and attentive on his journey.

That the naturalists *saw* more is tellingly, if fictionally, explored by Attwood in a piece of careful myth-contesting, a view supported by Tipping's publication of Becker's long-overlooked collection of paintings. Whereas Becker was there to reveal nature through science, Burke 'waged war against the emptiness of the interior' and tried to show his own worthiness through winning that 'war' (Attwood 2003, pp. 140–141). Attwood contrasted Howitt's 'exploring properly' with Burke's 'rushing about like madmen' (Attwood 2003, p. 94).

Murgatroyd (2002), Attwood (2003) and Bonyhady (1991) focused on Burke's self-destructive racism. They contrasted it with Wills' and King's gradually dawning appreciation and Howitt's effortless recognition of and interest in the Aborigines' cultural differences. Murgatroyd (2002, pp. 150–154) deplored Burke's lack of ordinary good manners in encounters with the Aborigines, suggesting that what was needed was recognition of simple protocols for sharing space and resources, rules of hospitality that are universal and often similar but that depend on recognition of common humanity, something that Burke lacked.

Burke's intellectual and physical capacity compared with those of the Aborigines was brought into perspective by the outcome. Attwood (2003, p. 268) cited an *Age* report following Brahe's return to Melbourne: 'the entire company of explorers has been dissipated out of being, like dewdrops before the sun', highlighting the essentially ephemeral nature of the explorers' presence in the desert landscape. It would be

impossible to describe Aborigines' presence in those terms – they were interrelated with the reality of the desert, not superimposed on it.

### *Do myths influence realities?*

All these later accounts took a very different view of the role of the Aborigines encountered on the expedition from that of the earlier myth. Yet in the 1980s and 1990s new versions of the story continued to reinforce the myth of tragic grandeur, perhaps to their detriment. The 1985 film *Burke & Wills* was a critical failure and box-office flop that had 'some trouble maintaining a dramatic center', perhaps, as one critic pointed out, because of the difficulty of retelling such a well-known story without a new angle (<http://movies.tvguide.com/burke-wills/121799>). The film 'runs short of plot even before the explorers run short of water' even though it made an effort to convey something of the genuine beauty and diversity of the Australian landscape.

The inclusion of a triumphal climactic scene – woefully inaccurate, historically – in which the explorers cavorted on a white sandy beach in a moment of explorational triumph at reaching the Gulf of Carpentaria, demonstrated how the film emphasised old values and expectations. In this scene 19th-century imperialism met the 20th-century beach fetish in a welter of improbability, since everyone who knows the story knows that the exhausted and frustrated Burke and Wills turned back when they saw the rise and fall of salt water in the mangrove swamps and were robbed of the movie's destination-focused satisfaction. Perhaps the film could have been more in touch with contemporary sensibility had it more fully recognised Walter Goodman's (1987) point in his *New York Times* review that:

*The most evocative element of 'Burke and Wills' are the tribesmen, who move like shadows along the expedition's way, part of the land that the white men have set out to exploit. The observation of a young*

*soldier that the country is, after all, the black man's, seems a gesture to present-day sensibilities, yet each time the natives appear, in the often surprising editing of Tim Wellburn, the movie sounds a deeper note.*

In the populist television program *Bush Tucker Man*, Les Hiddens was at pains to show how the land in which the explorers perished was a 'supermarket' of good food to the educated (i.e. Aboriginal) eye. His program, however, made its point about our relationship with the land more powerfully through its signature scenes of his huge 4WD rig rocking around bends in a cloud of soil, and in his remark that this country is best visited in a helicopter (Hiddens 1996).

It seems that the great disaster was capable of spawning updates on the myth, keeping pace with a changing Australian society: from macho imperialism to beaches and four-wheel drives, all found a place.

How do they do this? Paul Carter (1996, p. 10) suggested that 'the colonizer produces the country he will inhabit out of his own imagining'. Popular Australian imaginings, founded on myths, are easier to accept than some alternative realities. As Europeans have possessed Australia, 'imagining' has required accommodating or ignoring the dispossession of the Aborigines and destruction of much of their culture. It has denied the inappropriateness of European agriculture for most of the continent, or the constraints imposed by boom and bust ecological cycles. Popular acceptance of exploration as heroic discovery and necessary conquest of Indigenous people and nature has been problematic. It remains prevalent but is no longer useful in building sustainable relationships, a process that is a preoccupation of many practitioners in the field of Outdoor Education.

These days terms such as 'exploration', 'expedition', 'adventure' and 'wilderness' are commonly used in this context, where they sit rather uneasily with an array of modern designer gear, communication devices and

safety protocols. In many outdoor and adventure activities, inappropriate ideas about Australian nature and how to live in it continue to resonate. Culturally, it is possible to see aspects of this as extensions of popular mythology in the Burke and Wills tradition.

## 'The journey' in Outdoor Education

Australian Outdoor Education (and bushwalking and outdoor pursuits generally) was founded in the classic discovery and exploration narrative: 'the journey' was a key idea. In Outdoor Education, journeying implies an extended walk requiring extensive planning, carrying everything you need, protecting yourself from hostile weather, mastering skills such as finding your way, first aid, cooking, finding water, making camp. Just like Burke and Wills. The rationale involves embracing discomfort, endurance and difficulty in order to achieve a host of psychological, social, health and personal goals (Slattery 2004).

These are practices and goals of people who do not live with or in the landscape. They perhaps depend on a fundamental misconception about 'being' in a place, one that has colonial origins. In colonial terms, Aborigines were often characterised as 'nomads'. But an objective look would see that colonising people were the true wanderers (see Figure 10.2). They spread their presence well beyond their place of origin, whereas 'nomadic' people, ironically, are deeply connected with a fixed area of country and do not make unnecessary journeys which are inherently expensive in terms of energy and efficiency (Brody 2001). Journeying takes time that could be better spent in living with what the landscape provides: this time is needed for the equivalents of preparing nardoo, jerking camel meat, looking for water – something Tom Bergin felt strongly in his 1977 re-enactment (Bergin 1981). Knowledge of other places is shared through overlapping



Figure 10.2: 'The Exploring party coming upon an encampment of natives 1861'. Henricus Leonardus van den Houten. Oil on canvas. National Library of Australia Pictorial Collection. Accession no. R11532.

language, geographical and ceremonial boundaries, not necessarily through journeying for its own sake. Even the cause of Burke and Wills' deaths, poison from thiaminose-blocking vitamin B absorption, would have taken years of interaction to discover and deal with: detailed interactions and knowledge are required.

Although surmounting intrinsic problems is claimed as a success in the practice of journeying, it is in fact parasitic on the knowledge and goodwill of 'nomadic' people. In Australia the Aborigines often shared information and acted as guides and custodians: explorers were literally handed from group to group by local owners, who also acted as envoys and negotiated the explorers' passage for them (Reynolds 1980; Allen 2011). Even though Burke resisted, he was still helped by locals: at the Gulf of Carpentaria, while floundering in bogs, Burke and Wills were shown a hard well-trodden path, water and yams (Wills diary, quoted in Murgatroyd 2002, p. 212).

More broadly, the concept of 'bushmanship' also continues to mimic

exploration. In the 19th century exploration described 'bushmanship' as leadership, showing qualities such as decision-making, confidence, organisation of supplies and management of horses. It also involved 'reading the landscape' for comfortable campsites, negotiable routes, food and water sources for men and animals, openness to 'local' knowledge and avoidance of various hazards (Cameron *et al.* 1999). These are close to skills valued and taught in Outdoor Education and outdoor pursuits, but they tend to avoid questions about how education might develop relevant and productive practices for living in Australian conditions as custodians rather than as conquerors or settlers.

## Conclusion

Myths are open to contest. As suggested by Attwood, Bonyhady and Murgatroyd, other versions of achievement, relationship, heroism and competence could have been told as part of the Burke and Wills story; they usually have not been told. Most people have never heard of Dick and Peter, of the

Yandruwandha, of Becker and Beckler and few have heard of Howitt, yet in terms of lasting contributions to a national culture, a culture of engagement with the outdoors, their contributions provided a firmer basis than those of the heroic Burke and Wills. The prevailing myth depends for its strength on admiration of the value of conquest and discovery, not of slow careful observation and adaptation to a place and to another culture.

The qualities that alternative versions of the Burke and Wills narratives suggest boil down to admiration for a certain openness to the world outside the self, a state of mind capable of deriving enormous interest from staying put. These interpretations reject aims centred on realities that are carried with the self rather than found independent of it. They praise curiosity about various versions of structured reality of the external world as a source of intrinsic interest. Howitt, Becker and Beckler's attitudes express this.

Here, the broader frame of reference is the way in which a nation's identity is constantly negotiated, being 'secured and legitimated' through appeals to the 'common heritage of its people', in formal history or elsewhere (Soper 2003, p. 31). Recent narratives about the expedition can be seen as part of what is called the history wars, or perhaps even 'black armband' history (McIntyre and Clark 2003). These histories are not negative in the sense of rejecting the value of the achievements of the settler society of the 19th century. Rather, they try to find dimensions in those achievements that retain value in a non-imperial age, when indigenous Australian people and nature are acknowledged. In respecting different views of skill, knowledge, empathy, perception or environmental response they suggest new models to be admired and perhaps emulated, and offer new ideas about how we explore and extend this identity.

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# The influence of Aboriginal country on artist and naturalist Ludwig Becker of the Victorian Exploring Expedition: Mootwingee, 1860–61

*Peta Jeffries*

## Introduction

This chapter is about how the artist and naturalist of the Burke and Wills Victorian Exploring Expedition, Dr Ludwig Becker, interpreted an Australian Aboriginal place in 1861. It is an exploration of one particular painting, 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji' (see Figure 11.1), and the varied worldviews that it represents. It argues that the painting was both before and ahead of its time; clearly it was of the time, but it also prefigured later ideas about relationship to landscape and with country. By tracing the theoretical, aesthetic and scientific influences upon Becker this chapter also proposes that the subjective nature of the work offered an understanding of Aboriginal connection to country.

Ludwig Becker was appointed artist and naturalist of the Burke and Wills Victorian

Exploring Expedition of 1860–61. The position encompassed the multiple roles of 'Geological, Mineralogical, and Natural History Observer', which included a 'wider range of scientific activities in addition to that of expedition artist' (Ninnis 2011, p. 315). A largely overlooked aspect of the purpose of the Victorian Exploring Expedition was that it was a 'scientific expedition' (Thorne 2011, p. iii). The expedition was organised by the Exploration Committee of the Royal Society of Victoria, which included leading scientists of the colony who set the scientific goals for the expedition.

On expeditions and explorations, before photography became more common, the main method of recording the scientific data of flora, fauna, landscape, Indigenous people and meteorological phenomena was by sketching and painting. Becker was given detailed instructions, which focused on

specific requirements for illustration and record-keeping (Macadam 1860 in Ninnis 2011, p. 315), for example: 'Sketches of all remarkable geological sections are desirable, also outline views of mountain ranges, remarkable hills, and other physical features on either side of the line of route; also of all objects of natural history and natives (aborigines)'.

Ludwig Becker, inspired by Romanticism and the Romantic Sublime, perceived the environment in a unique way, especially compared to other members of the expedition. Jeffries (1993, p. 191) noted that Becker invoked the category of the sublime when referring to the landscapes of western New South Wales or New England. Haynes (1998, p. 100) claimed that 'had Becker lived to become familiar with Darwin's *Origin*

*of Species*, he might well have produced a unique response to this proposed ordering of Nature and transformed nineteenth-century art in this country'. Haynes similarly linked Becker with both the Romantic movement and scientific ideas. Becker's approach was revealed through his artwork with its German Romantic sensitivity 'to elements that transcend physical and material explanation', effects that are 'more felt or imagined than visual or measurable' (Haynes 1998, p. 100). 'It is this rare combination of insights from his two role models – the Romanticism of Friedrich and the scientific regimen of von Humboldt – that makes Becker's desert landscapes unique' (Haynes 1998, p. 100). In 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji' Becker created a work that reveals the challenges faced by many



Figure 11.1: 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji'. Ludwig Becker. 1861? The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.

Australian landscape artists – the desire to find and express the interconnection between people and place, self and other – that is, to understand country. This artwork moves beyond the colonial romantic representation of landscape as an act of imperial transformation and verges instead on the Abstract Sublime, which challenges the viewer to consider their relationship with nature. Abstract Sublime informed the Abstract Expressionist movement, which gave non-Aboriginal people a way to understand a multi-dimensional sense of country as portrayed in Aboriginal art.

This more felt or imagined perception of landscape was particularly revealed in 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji', which was aligned with Aboriginal ways of relating to country; it revealed the beginning of an alternative perspective to the naturalist way of perceiving the landscape. Our understanding of Aboriginal relationships to country has been made more possible or accessible since the emergence of contemporary Aboriginal desert art and our current understanding of aesthetic theories and artistic movements. Therefore, this analysis of how Aboriginal people and place influenced Becker must take into consideration the synthesis of different art movements and other significant influences upon this artist and naturalist of the Victorian Exploring Expedition.

### **Becker's sublime sentiment as a way to understand Aboriginal country: a link between art and science**

One aim for the naturalist artist was to record and document with rational scientific detachment. However, because subjectivity is inevitably revealed through art practice, art was eventually taken out of the general scientific law. This polarisation of art and science created many avenues of aesthetic response to the environment in the ongoing search for meaning and connection.

'Kant limits the sublime to nature, but as

nature becomes more and more an object of scientific manipulation the attempt to reveal a non-sensuous truth not available to science often tends to be transferred into art. This truth is no longer representable in any other medium than the particular work of art concerned, which therefore becomes an attempt to say the unsayable' (Bowie 2003, p. 46). The naturalist was intended to conform to a general scientific law but Becker, affected by varied influences, communicated a truth of the Australian landscape that general science alone could not communicate. Art had become a way, especially in the tradition of the Sublime, to express the unsayable.

Ludwig Becker, born in Darmstadt, Germany and his friend Viennese-born Eugène von Guérard, of German parentage, belonged to a group called the Forty-Eighters whose renunciation of the old world led them to search for identity in the new – common reasons for many Europeans to emigrate to Australia after the 1848 revolutions. Becker and von Guérard stemmed from similar backgrounds with noble connections, and had travelled extensively in Europe (Tipping 1991, p. 83). von Guérard received a more formal education than Becker and in Germany had viewed 'the work of great artists in museums ... admiring in particular the work of Casper David Friedrich'; not 'only Kant but Goethe must have had some effect on Guérard's intellectualism' for he found that he could 'relate to Kant's dictum that "Nature adorns eternity with ever-changing appearances" and that the meanest and the noblest of her creatures were just as rich and as inexhaustible' (Tipping 1991, p. 85). The two men, although practising very different styles of art, both struggled with repercussions of Enlightenment ideas and the rise of modernity, especially the impact upon the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia and their environment. Their greatest concern was how to represent this.

von Guérard and Becker offered unique representations of colonisation, especially

in regard to Aboriginal people and their relationship with the environment. They 'gave little indication that they considered the natives inferior to Europeans. Nor did they romanticise the image of the noble savage' (Tipping 1991, p. 82). This is especially relevant in Becker's artwork: with elements that transcended physical and material explanation, his work displayed effects that are 'felt or imagined rather than visual or measurable' (Haynes 1998, p. 100). As an admirer of Casper David Friedrich, 'Becker was conscious of looking for the antipodean equivalent' and '(u)nlike his English contemporaries, he was able to exult in the immensity of the Australian desert as sublime rather than threatening, and to interpret it visually in the romantic tradition' (Haynes 1998, p. 100). This is an important point, because although in early colonial Australia there was hope of an inland sea and visions of grand settlement, much of the 'desert' would later be perceived as 'useless' and 'barren' land.

Becker's greatest desire was to unveil some of the mysteries of this country, a desire shared by Humboldt, who believed that unveiling could be achieved by 'patient study of Nature's differences as part of an infinitely varied cosmos' (Haynes 1998, p. 100). He explained that Becker's landscape paintings show a degree of experimentation in recording that is not apparent in the work of any other 19th-century artist. This is especially obvious in the painting, 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji'.

## Humboldt's influence and the implications for environmental justice and contemporary ecological understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence

Humboldt's influence on Becker in areas related to ecological thought has significance in some early 21st-century discussions on environmental justice, because it placed

Becker within a field of thought that was more able to recognise Aboriginal philosophies of land management or ecology. Sachs (2003, p. 111) shared a close reading of the writings of the explorer-scientist-abolitionist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). With reference to current ecological issues, Sachs argued that Humboldt could have been the founder of a humane and socially conscious ecology. Sachs mediated the overlaps between environmentalism, post-colonial theory and the practice of history. He suggested that 'Humboldt's efforts to inspire communion with Nature while simultaneously recognizing Nature's "otherness" can be seen as radical both in his day and in ours' and that his 'analysis of the link between the exploitation of natural resources and the exploitation of certain social groups anticipates the global environmental justice movement' (Sachs 2003, p. 111). These were the issues addressed by the philosophies of the German Romantics and the Sublime artists, and they are especially pertinent in the work of Ludwig Becker.

The philosophies offer a contemporary and evolving way of relating to the environment that has been informed by theory developed over hundreds of years and significantly mirroring Aboriginal law, Dreaming and country. 'A truly mature relationship between environmentalism and post-colonialism' would likely result in 'the embrace of something like the social ecology that Murray Bookchin has been developing over the last four decades' which can be traced back to Humboldt (Sachs 2003, p. 113). All over the world, but particularly in the USA, he became known as the founder of a new science, a grand theory which sought to link all the physical elements of the world, including every kind of human being, in a web of interdependence, 'to recognize unity in the vast diversity of phenomena' and to 'study the great harmonies of Nature' (cited in Sachs 2003, p. 114). This aspect of Humboldt's theories



can be related to Aboriginal philosophies of interconnectedness and interdependence, awareness and understanding, which had existed for thousands of years prior to white settlement in 1788.

This chapter supports Haynes' suggestion that if Becker had read Darwin's *Origin of Species* he might well have produced a unique response to its proposed ordering of Nature and transformed 19th-century art in this country. Influenced by Humboldt, Becker did produce a unique response and if he had lived longer he may have developed it further. Humboldt's reputation later diminished 'in large to the ascension of Darwinian thought' and the 'supplanting of Humboldt's vision of a unified, harmonious world by Darwin's "struggle for existence"' (Sachs 2003, p. 116). In this context, responsibility fell onto artistic aesthetic depictions of the environment, to express in a more pronounced way what science could not. Becker offered a understanding of the effect of colonisation, specifically the Burke and Wills expedition, on Aboriginal people and place – this painting reveals his search for an understanding of humanity in nature.

During colonisation, the artist as naturalist operated within the centric structure that objectifies the other, the artist as spectator was separated from nature. 'Post-colonialism, at its best, means recuperating the objects of the traveler's gaze' and 'in a world so profoundly shaped – damaged (he would argue) – by colonialism and imperialism, it is imperative that scholars focus on celebrating the colonized, on hearing the voices of "others"' (Sachs 2003, p. 117). Sachs' close reading of Humboldt's major writings revealed the extent to which he developed 'a socially conscious ecology, a positive vision of humanity in nature' – Humboldt aimed 'to depict the contemplation of natural objects, as a means of exciting a pure love of nature' (Sachs 2003, p. 118). This pure love of nature and vision of humanity in nature is revealed in the work of the Romantic Sublime and

Abstract Sublime, and most specifically by Abstract Expressionist artists to whom harmony with nature (both internal and external) is the key.

Humboldt combined rational empiricism with a romantic sense of harmony; he had 'an almost postmodern awareness that nature and culture are inextricably linked; yet he also felt a profound respect for nature's differentness' (Sachs 2003, p. 119). Becker shared this understanding or appreciation, revealed in 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji' as his experiment to understand and connect with the landscape.

## Embracing Indigenous Australian knowledge to develop a sense of belonging and care for country

Becker's artwork has influenced many artistic depictions of the interior of Australia, a topic that is outside the scope of this chapter but that is relevant because it places Becker at the forefront of a non-Indigenous attempt to connect with the landscape in a manner that is more in tune with Aboriginal philosophies. As Gammage (2012, p. 323) stated: 'if we are to survive, let alone feel at home, we must begin to understand our country. If we succeed, one day we might become Australians'. This section reflects on ways in which non-Indigenous Australians have embraced elements of Indigenous Australian cosmology to develop a sense of belonging and care for country. These concepts have become better understood due to artistic representation of place, particularly from Aboriginal art and from rare glimpses that images such as Becker's have offered. The inclusion of Indigenous peoples' traditional understanding of nature benefits not only practical strategies in the conversation and practical groundwork of conservation and current environmental justice debates, it also offers settler Australians a way of connecting with the environment to create a deeper sense of belonging that is respectful of Aboriginal philosophies.

Becker's artwork painted at Mootwingee, a place of great significance to Aboriginal people, revealed an interesting response to country. 'Country' is an Aboriginal English term that represents a place that is:

*... small enough to accommodate face-to-face groups of people, large enough to sustain their lives, politically autonomous in respect of other, structurally equivalent countries, and at the same time interdependent with other countries, each country is itself the focus and source of Indigenous law and life practice. To use the philosopher's term, one's country is a nourishing terrain, a place that gives and receives life (Rose 1999, p. 177).*

It is important to understand that country is 'multidimensional: it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air'. It has a past and a future and exists both in and through time; humans were created for country and

*human groups hold the view that they are an extremely important part of the life of their country. It is not possible, however, to contend that a country, or indeed regional system of countries, is human centered. To the extent that a country or region can be said to have a central focus, that focus is the system of interdependent responsibilities by which the continuity of life in the country and the region is ensured (Rose 1999, p. 178).*

These 'nourishing terrains' require a consciousness and responsibility from all participants in living systems, their interdependence leading to a fundamental proposition of Aboriginal law: 'those who destroy their country destroy themselves' (Rose 1999, p. 178). Country is the created world, 'brought into being as a world of form, difference, connection and responsibility by the great creating beings, called Dreamings' (Rose 1999, p. 178). They encourage connection with and a sense of caring for country. We should listen to the Indigenous

advice of Bill Neidjie: 'You got to hang onto this story because the earth, this ground, earth where you brought up, this earth he grow you ... This piece of ground he grow you.' This piece of ground grows you in the same way as it grows a plant or a tree, or the cotton that forms our clothes. In this 'we recognize self-interest in nurturing others so that for example others will be available to be hunted, fished or gathered' (Rose 1999, p. 178; Plumwood 1999). With this brief understanding of Aboriginal relationships with the environment we can now look at Mootwingee as Ludwig Becker interpreted it. Insights from Herman Beckler will also be considered.

## Interpreting Mootwingee

Mootwingee is approximately 130 km north-east of Broken Hill in New South Wales,. Another German scientist on the expedition, Hermann Beckler, described Mootwingee (or Mutanié) as 'a small paradise' (Beckler 1993, p. 107):

*Nature, so sparing over large areas here, had lavishly thrown a wealth of varying beauty and grace over the Mutanié Ranges. Because of their diversity and because they were concentrated in such a small area, they are very difficult to describe in detail. There was a charming valley, about ten miles in length and half to one mile across, enclosed on either side by gentle hills which alternated with steep rock-faces and weathered stone. Contained within the eastern hills were five major gorges, each containing one or more rocky reservoirs. Every one of them was unique in its shape and formation. Thick scrub covered the row of hills and the rocky outcrops to the east right down to the valley floor, whereas on the left (westwards) the plant cover was thinner and consisted primarily of smaller plants. On the flat floor of the valley, the scene was so peaceful and inviting that one thinks of oneself as surrounded by cultivated land and wants to look for*

*the homes of civilised people. This was Mutanié (Beckler 1993, p. 105).*

This description showed the uniqueness of Mootwingee's geography in the surrounding semi-arid landscape. Beckler viewed the place as worthy of settlement and considered that it looked like it had already been 'civilised'. This supports the thesis that the country was 'made by the Aborigines' (Gammage 2012). However, any acknowledgement by Beckler of Aboriginal presence and agency was only subtle. He continued: 'It is highly probable that a settler has already set up his hut there as I write these lines and is grazing his sheep. And to live there in peace, far removed from the noise of the world in the modest, uncomplicated way offered by the extreme isolation and the bush – I do not hesitate to call Mutanié a small paradise' (Beckler 1993, p. 106).

This colonising response to place reveals that Beckler 'draws on a principal rhetorical convention from the humanist tradition, the *locus amoenus* (a pleasant place) in order to express his enthusiasm for Mootwingee' (Jeffries 1993, p. 191). Jeffries incorrectly suggested that, unlike Ludwig Becker, Beckler never invoked the sublime when referring to the country through which they travelled (Jeffries 1993, p. 191). Beckler did express both the instrumentalist cause and sublime sentiments of awe and great love towards nature:

*Our camels stood chest deep in the best feed wherever the gravelly beds of the creeks entered the valley. There was also plenty of grass available so that the horses were equally well provided for. Large, isolated eucalypts stood along the watercourses, and here and there was a splendid grevillea (never found south of the Mutanié Ranges) with rough, black, iron coloured bark, leaves in bundles and numerous white clusters of flowers standing vertically upright (in the manner of our wild chestnuts). As one travelled northwards the valley acquired a curious appearance from the rows of*

*low cassia bushes whose natural growth was such that from a distance they appeared to have been clipped, forming regular green lines or strips. Once again one felt that a civilised hand must have been at work (Beckler 1993, p. 107).*

Most obvious in this passage is the human-centric tradition, with Beckler describing the country's suitability for feeding stock, showing the utilitarian hopes for the country but giving no apparent credit to the Indigenous inhabitants. Developing a sense of familiarity was a prerequisite for settlers to feel 'at home' and comfortable in new environments; part of the process of colonising a place was creating an aesthetic image reminiscent of 'home'. Visions or recognition of cultivation, of humanity within nature, were obviously comforting for Beckler. The cultivated appearance of Mootwingee was aesthetically beautiful to the colonial eye, and it offered something more:

*I had indeed intended to describe the individual gorges, but however readily my memory returns to them, the task seems more and more thankless. We will take leave now from Mutanié with a last visit to the second gorge from the south, the most magnificent of them all and the one which held the largest and loveliest reservoir. Even after repeatedly visiting this gorge, the traveller is overcome by a sense of reverent awe. Vertical rock-faces, dark grey to a height of 20 to 35 feet and above that a lively yellow clay colour to a height of 60 to 70 feet, enclosed a sheet of water of about 50 feet in diameter on three sides. The sun was close to setting and the night's shadows had already crept on to this lonely spot, but the ruin-like, rocky spires still reflected the light of the fading sun – an astonishing effect of light and shade in such a closely confined space. Still darker rocks were mirrored on the dark, shadowy water surface (Beckler 1993, p. 107).*

Thus Beckler did refer to Mootwingee with ideas of the sublime, denoting a 'sense of

reverent awe' and using German Romanticism to describe the 'ruin-like, rocky spires', an analogy that paralleled nature with the church. Perhaps the perceived loneliness of Mootwingee expressed a personal longing to connect. Beckler's recollection of the gorge is a fitting description of Becker's painting: 'This scenery caused very great difficulty for our artist. The narrow picture rose in front of and around us to such heights that, viewed at close range, it could not be accommodated by the rules of perspective' (Beckler 1993, p. 107).

Becker may have had difficulty not only with the rules of perspective; he could have been struggling to convey the 'astonishing effect of light and shade' and his response to this spiritually significant Aboriginal place (see Beckett *et al.* 2008 for the significance of Aboriginal connections with the country of Mootwingee). However, as can be seen in Figure 11.2, Becker resolved any issues about perspective. The empirical sketch is a

detailed rational representation of the rock formations, the outline of the gorge and the rock pool, but it fell short of addressing the artist's relation or interdependence with nature. Only through the abstraction of this careful sketch can we begin to appreciate the complex diversity of this place.

### Beyond rational empiricism towards harmony in complex diversity: art theory as a way of comprehending Aboriginal philosophies of country

Becker's 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji' overlaps the aesthetic boundaries of Northern and German Romanticism, the Sublime and the Abstract Sublime, resulting in a semi-abstract interpretation of a highly spiritual Aboriginal place that expresses the sentiment of Aboriginal country. This overlap is important to consider, together with the understanding that each movement



Figure 11.2: 'Reservoir in Mootwanji Ranges [Gorge Mootwanji]'. Ludwig Becker. 1861? The Royal Society of Victoria Collection: The State Library of Victoria. Accession no. H16486.



influenced Abstract Expressionism. In Madrid in 2008, there was an exhibition called *The Abstraction of Landscape: From Northern Romanticism to Abstract Expressionism*, which followed the 'evolution of the Romantic landscape throughout modernism up to its ultimate abstraction in American Abstract Expressionism' as conceived by art historian Robert Rosenblum of Oxford University. This synthesis began in an earlier publication (Rosenblum 1961), in which he 'first proposed a connection between the Romantic tradition of Northern Europe and the movement American Abstract Expressionism' (Fundación Juan March 2008, p. 7). This section covers Rosenblum's thesis that the 19th-century landscape and the Northern Romantic tradition was 'the origin of modern abstraction ... the birth of abstraction' which came 'out of the spirit of Romantic Landscape'.

Linking Becker's work to the Romantic, Romantic Sublime, Abstract Sublime and Abstract Expressionism offers a theoretical entry point into understanding the 'truth' that he was attempting to reveal with 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji'. The following discussion looks at how Rosenblum's thesis is supported by Becker's interpretation of the Australian landscape and how this connects with our contemporary understanding of Aboriginal country.

The colonial structure inflicted many of the first Europeans to explore Australia with cultural blindness to Aboriginal country. The most alarming prospect faced by the inland explorers, coming from heavily populated Britain and Europe, was the 'Ghastly Blank' (Moorehead 1963, p. 1). This was 'particularly true of the desert with its repeated vistas of empty horizontal plane under a cloudless, overarching sky'; it seems paradoxical that this vast expanse of apparently empty space was so frequently described, in explorers' accounts, 'in the Gothic terms of enclosure and entrapment' (Haynes 1998, p. 77). The arid regions challenged the European rules of perspective and picture composition,

due to the low horizon and seemingly featureless vista. Mootwingee offered Becker an opportunity to depict the arid regions through the aesthetics offered by the art movements evolving simultaneously in Europe and the USA.

The 'desert' (arid and semi-arid zones of Australia) seemed a place of few visual objects but apparently limitless space charged with a sense of the infinite. Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) offered the most influential analysis of such feelings: 'Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime' (cited in Rosenblum 1975, p. 161). Quoting from Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790 I, Book 2, §23), 'the Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented'. It has been argued that 'such a breathtaking confrontation with a boundlessness in which we also experience an equally powerful totality is a motif that continually links the painters of the Romantic Sublime' (Fundacion Juan March 2008, p. 163). Examples are Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (c. 1809), a great inspiration to Becker, and Turner's *Evening Star* (c. 1830), a painting that has many similarities to Becker's work. Another is Rothko's *Light Earth over Blue* (1954), which reveals affinities of vision and feeling. These artistic developments of Abstract Expressionism replace 'the abrasive, ragged fissures of Ward's and Still's real and abstract gorges with a no less numbing phenomenon of light and void, Rothko, like Friedrich and Turner, places us on the threshold of those shapeless infinities discussed by the estheticians of the Sublime' (Rosenblum 1961, cited in Fundacion Juan March 2008, p. 163). Becker's work shows similar developments.

Becker softened and abstracted the ragged fissures of the Mootwingee Gorge, offering a phenomenon of light and void. The painting



offers vision and feeling of something which Becker found indescribable in words; the work was not mentioned in his journals or letters and he did not record its date of completion. The painting offers a sense of timelessness and wonder: it offers stillness that exists both in and through time. The painting offers no hint of time, and we could easily assume that it is contemporary instead of 19th-century Australian colonial Romantic art.

Becker's painting emanates an unseen force similar to that found in the blurring boundaries of Romantic Sublime and Abstract Sublime. During the Romantic era, 'the sublimities of nature gave proof of the divine: today such supernatural experiences are conveyed through the abstract medium of paint alone' (Rosenblum 1961, p. 166). Is what we see in Becker's painting the beginning of a similar experience, where the only way to express the timelessness or spiritual unknown of the landscape is through abstract painting? Like Turner's and Friedrich's works in which 'the mystic trinity of sky, water and earth ... appears to emanate from an unseen force' (Rosenblum 1961, p. 166), a similar description could be applied to Becker's painting. Rosenblum held that the line from 'the Romantic Sublime to the Abstract Sublime is broken and devious, for its tradition is more one of erratic, private feeling than submission to objective disciplines'. This private feeling is expressed in Becker's painting with its sublime abstraction, especially if we compare it with the pictorial work of von Guérard, who preferred the French tradition that dominated landscape painting at the time.

Ludwig Becker maintained the continuity and overlap of the Romantic tradition and touched upon the Abstract Sublime to express the multi-dimensional quality of the Aboriginal landscape. Becker's artwork showed a void filled with a meditative stillness and reflective response that revealed the limitless power of this sacred place. It was an attempt to unveil some

of the mysteries of this country, to offer a 'true' response to the people and the place. The painting shows Becker's resistance to the French and Dusseldorf influences that inspired artists such as von Guérard to paint fanciful, finely detailed, allegorical or religious stories where the landscape and Aboriginal were often 'backgrounded' (Rose 1999, p. 176). The challenge of revealing the 'truth' was shared by many artists and scientists of the time and is still relevant today in forming relationships with place and accepting the concepts associated with the Aboriginal-defined multi-dimensional country.

Becker painted not solely what he saw at Mootwingee but also what he saw within himself. The central perspective was where the water met the rocks at the centre but, with the reflection of the sky in the water, the contrast of light and shadow and the blurring of the jagged rockface, Becker showed a subjective response which draws the viewer deep into another world. He offers a brief glimpse of the visible world, and a sense of a sublimely immense unknown world.

Becker's painting introduces the viewer to a world that can be more easily understood through Aboriginal concepts of the interconnectedness and multi-dimensionality of country and/or the art theory of the Sublime, Abstract Sublime and Abstract Expressionism. The viewer's eye is led below the horizon and deep into the earthen rock where the sky reflected in the water creates another space. This challenges the idea of central perspective in art, as does the lack of a horizon line in the work of central desert landscape painters.

## Aborigines inventing the idea of modern art: Australia's unique art movement

The lack of horizon line and flattened perspective of landscape art is reasonably well-understood and it could be argued that Aboriginal philosophies of country were at

the forefront of this artistic development. Australian art historian Ian McLean (2011), a well-known commentator on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian art, edited and introduced a book of writings on Aboriginal contemporary art, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*. As the previous sections have shown, Becker's multiple influences offered an alternative way to relate to the people and places he encountered, which enabled him to explore the interconnectedness of nature and humanity revealed by Aboriginal people and place. The influence of Aboriginal country on Becker situates his work within a contemporary aesthetic. It could be argued that Aboriginal philosophy is most strongly portrayed through art and is more easily understood through the framework of our contemporary understanding or appreciation of aesthetics – through art theory and historical identification of 'art movements'.

Appropriation of Aboriginal philosophies as a way to develop connections and understanding of place has a long history within Australia, particularly within the art world. The Australian 'Modernists', such as Margaret Preston and Len Lye, realised in the 1920s that the Aboriginal aesthetic had 'relevance to their own practice' (McLean 2011, p. 23). Later Modernists were 'enticed by the affinity they saw between Aboriginal art forms and avant-garde European art, especially cubism and expressionism' (McLean 2011, p. 23):

*One newspaper reporter was onto it early, facetiously writing in 1929, in a report on the Melbourne exhibition Australian Aboriginal Art, that 'many of these (bark paintings) are the works of the fierce Alligator River tribes, whose artists evidently included cubists and impressionists'. If the Kakadu barks looked cubist, most Aboriginal art would not begin to look like modernism until later in the century, when abstract expressionism and minimalism became the avant-gardist norm. Little wonder*

*then that Aboriginal art did not properly seduce the artworld until the late-twentieth century (McLean 2011, p. 23).*

Eurocentric eyes could not fully appreciate Aboriginal aesthetics without understanding the significance of Abstract Expressionism and the connection between Romanticism, the Sublime, the landscape and the interconnectedness of humans with nature. Becker was influenced by Aboriginal people, appreciating their artwork at Mootwingee and their philosophical and spiritual connections with country revealed to him through the educational influences of Romanticism and Humboldt. Becker was searching for the antipodean equivalent to the art and science popular in Europe and the USA in a manner that decentred the colonial structure.

As McLean (2011, p. 23) stated, the 'Australian artworld's blinkered Eurocentrism is the main reason for its extreme tardiness in recognising the aesthetic relevance of Aboriginal art'. Although Johnson (1987) argued that 'the triumph of Aboriginal contemporary art was the result of a deliberate move by Aboriginal artists on the art world, rather than an internal move in the self-fascinated games of the art world', the art world had to 'change its way of thinking before Aboriginal art could hope for a place at the table' (McLean 2011, p. 43). By 1989 the contemporary Australian art 'landscape' had been 'upturned so thoroughly and in ways completely unforeseen' that 'there was no going back' (McLean 2011, p. 42). The critic Nicholas Baume wrote:

*There is a kind of art now being produced in Australia ... that isn't stifled by influence. Ironically, it is often said to resemble the very styles whose influence on modern Australian art has been most stifling – Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Unlike the provincial versions of such movements, this art is not derivative, its resemblance being more a matter of coincidence than emulation. Aboriginal art, in particular that made in Central Australia using*

*non-traditional materials, has achieved a degree of international recognition accorded to few, if any, contemporary white Australian artists. It is a long time since Australia has boasted anything that could conceivably be called a 'school of painting'. The very idea of a stylistically and ideologically coherent movement in art is all but unthinkable in the 1980s, a period marked by stylisation rather than any particular visual continuity, by ambiguity rather than ideology. Nevertheless, a movement is precisely what has been recognised (Baume 1989, p. 110).*

In no way is this chapter comparing Becker's 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji' to the reverence and power of Aboriginal art's ability to express interconnectedness with nature. The intention is to show that Becker was sensitive to the sacred significance of Mootwingee and was able to articulate or interpret it through his painting. By highlighting how and at what points of reference this was possible, we show that Becker was attempting to unveil the secrets of place. His painting reveals a spiritual connection and acknowledgement of the earth centre as Mother, as home. In no way has he appropriated motifs or sacred stories; he has in a Romantic, Abstract Sublime way portrayed the inexplicable. The horizon line is lifted and the central perspective leads into infinity, the core of the earth. The sky is reflected in the water, connecting heaven to the earth to create a multi-dimensional sense of place.

We could argue that although Becker was responding to place and his relationship to country, the painting can only be interpreted through the Eurocentric understanding of Modernist art and not through Aboriginal philosophies. As Margo Neale (1998, p. 23) stated in regard to Emily Kame Kngwarreye's work: 'abstraction neither belongs to nor owes anything to the lineage of mainly white male modernist artists who preceded her ... The paintings refuse to be categorised

as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalist, Fauvist'. However, the terminology of art theory and criticism does offer a way to interpret and respond to a work in which the aura is so strong that there is no denying the interconnectedness between artist and country, self and other, internal and external.

With the appreciation that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art such as the work of Ludwig Becker has meaning when understood in terms of subjects rather than objects, we begin to see the similarities within the desire to express the multi-dimensional sense of country. Langton stated that Aboriginal art is more than 'an important component of the contemporary artworld: it fulfills the primary historical function of Australian art by showing "the settler Australian audience, caught ambiguously between old and new lands" a way to "belong to this place rather than another". Thus Aboriginal contemporary art is not just the most successful Australian art movement, it is what Australian art has always aspired to be' (cited in McLean 2011, p. 63). This chapter has proven that this is exactly what Ludwig Becker and his artwork aspired to do and be.

## Conclusion

Becker was a person of science and art; inspired by Humboldt and the Romantic and Sublime traditions, he was aware of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all species. He was aware of and thought about relationships between self and nature, the internal connections to the external world. In 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji' the central perspective is slightly dislocated – the vanishing point is not towards and into the horizon but into the earth. The abstraction of form and colour creates a sensory connection to place, a mirror to immensity.

In order to 'begin to understand Aboriginal people's perception of the desert we must appreciate the inseparable trinity that is fundamental to their culture and beliefs: the Ancestors – spiritual beings who created and continue to nurture the land in which

they dwell; the biological species including humans, that the Ancestors created; and the living, sustaining the land' (Haynes 1998, p. 12). Aboriginal philosophies and/or Creation stories locate creative power not in the heavens but deep within the land. This is reflected in Becker's painting.

Art offers a view of the world that science cannot. It involves subjective responses from both artist and viewer, each filtered through their separate influences and experiences. The 'authenticity of the artists' spiritual practices must be taken seriously. Far from being a repressed supplement in an otherwise conceptualist or postmodern practice, as it is for many postmodern critics, Aboriginal spirituality is the "difference that makes the difference" (McLean 2011, p. 62). As outlined in this chapter, non-Indigenous spiritual connections to the land must also be taken seriously otherwise there will remain a sense of detachment from place, self and other. An artistic response to place may be the only way to articulate that which is 'unsayable'.

Australian artists have long aspired to develop a way to portray their connections to country, and Becker's synthesis of styles reveals his attempt to move beyond the traditions of European landscape painting towards an intersubjective story of place. 'Water reservoir at Mutwanji' does not subdue the spiritual vibrancy of the landscape but enhances it to create an semi-abstract Romantic Sublime sense of harmony and balance. Becker's work has strongly influenced contemporary interpretations of landscape in Australian art. It is worthy of further aesthetic analysis for it clearly reveals the attempts made by settler Australians, who were caught not only between old and new lands but between old and new ways of relating to the land, to search for a way to belong to this place. The painting reveals a visually creative form, a new aesthetic understanding of beauty in the 19th century, and a consideration and awareness of the relationship between self

and nature. In this painting the narrative of colonial occupation has subsided, for Becker did not need to represent familiarity; it offers instead a multi-dimensional relationship with place.

## Endnote

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# If I belong here ... how did that come to be?

*Paul Lambeth*

## Introduction

A notion available to non-Indigenous Australians at this point in our history is a recognition we are living in an Aboriginal land. Investigating this view within arts practice led me to question, 'If I belong here ... how did that come to be?' The series of events leading to the deaths of Burke and Wills on Cooper Creek in 1861 provided a departure point for consideration of my question. While the Burke and Wills expedition is a well-documented event in Australia's colonial history, over time it has merged to myth status for a post-colonial audience. While the expedition may be read as an investment in both science and imagination, our post-colonial collective imaginations have continued to develop mytho-poetic readings of its events. This chapter will contribute to Australia's

ongoing collective cultural narrative via a representation of the events at Cooper Creek in 1861.

Almost 150 years after Burke and Wills headed north on their ill-fated expedition to the Gulf of Carpentaria and back, I stood on a small hillock somewhere in south-western Queensland and considered my position in this place on this continent at this time as a non-Indigenous Australian. Many accounts of inland Australian exploration can be considered extraordinary human endeavours: accounts of the Burke and Wills expedition stand out as raw tragedy, inherently loaded with poetic opportunity for contemporary readings including exploring what it is to be non-Indigenous in an Indigenous land. The events in raw form rise above an account of mere facts. The final days of Burke and Wills at Cooper Creek may well have come from the imagination of a gifted writer

exaggerating for effect, and climaxing in the death of Burke and Wills. The story is a rich source of material for creative response, loaded with content relevant to contemporary human experience.

A key component in this imaginative juxtaposition of the Burke and Wills story with my contemporary response was a visit to the Dig tree in 2007. The content of the images central to this investigation is a combination of my imaginative response and my physical experience of the landscape traversed by the Burke and Wills expedition. The raw information for my creative response was acquired by immersion in the various written and visual accounts of the Burke and Wills expedition, coupled with direct personal contact with the general and specific places that are the backdrop to this part of Australia's non-Indigenous formative history.

The intention was to transform a personal history of artistic practice into a cohesive body of work, both written and visual. I am treading uncertain ground, if claiming to make a contribution via a discussion of felt discordant and harmonious responses to place. The word 'felt' is problematic in an academic context where the focus is on the contribution of 'knowledge'.

## If I belong here ... how did that come to be?

Paul Carter's (1987) notion of spatial history was central in my thinking about my non-Indigenous position in place and the role of the Burke and Wills expedition in contributing to my understanding of my inherited cultural position (see Figure 12.1). Carter (1987, p. xxi) suggested that our colonial forebears were 'making spatial history. They were choosing directions, applying names, imagining goals, inhabiting the country'.

There has been change in understanding and aspiration of place in the 150 years between the Burke and Wills expedition and my own movement across the inland of

this country in the 21st century. Unlike the members of the Burke and Wills expedition, the success or otherwise of my movement through place was not measured by physical survival or by confirmation that inland Australia is a land of riches or an Arcadian wonderland, but rather by a self-set artistic plan.



*Figure 12.1: 'The meaning is here, tragic as it feels'. 2007. Paul Lambeth. Oil on canvas, 60 × 60 cm. © The artist.*

In establishing a plan to trace the cultural steps of place using the Burke and Wills expedition as a platform for creative exploration, I observed an imbalance between a genuine knowledge of place and the popular knowledge of inland Australians held by most people who inhabit the coastal fringe of this continent. The tragic outcome for Burke, Wills and others underlined the limited knowledge of place held by both organisers of and participants in the expedition (see Figure 12.2). An obvious supporting point is the decision to cross the continent during the hottest and most difficult time of year (ignoring for a moment the background political reasons for doing so). Shifting this observation to the 21st century, I posed a number of questions for contemporary consideration. For this non-Indigenous Australian, what part did

the tragic deaths of Burke and Wills play in determining my position in this place? More poetically, does it take culturally connected bones in the earth to understand one's place in it? Is our collective knowledge of place still inadequate to manage ourselves, our environment? What role can a contribution to our cultural narrative play in stimulating understanding of place?



*Figure 12.2:* 'This is not a dead heart, the colour of soil and blood'. 2008. Paul Lambeth. Oil on canvas, 45 × 45 cm. © The artist.

My approach in aspiring to contribute to our perpetual cultural narrative may be described as a search for small signs articulating qualities of place in the form of images and poetic language, recognising I came in the skin of an outsider with an aspiration to connect with place. The duality of my self-recognition as both an outsider and belonging to place presented a platform for my questioning and the subsequent creative responses. When moving through unfamiliar places of inland Australia, I reminded myself of the pre-existing Indigenous and colonial stories of the land, recognising it is a palimpsest of geological, organic and human endeavour. The experience of positioning self in a physical and cultural place offered opportunity to exercise creative curiosity

while acknowledging existing background references.

For post-modern humanity and a post-colonial Australia, the Australian landscape will continue to be a multi-layered space of physical and philosophical meaning, no matter what current descriptors are used to frame our narratives of this place. In addition to the multiple layers of existing stories associated with the country, my presence in these spaces came with a life of learned information that determined a personal perception of place (see Figure 12.3). I was like Burke and Wills, a package deal of curiosity and baggage, which caused me to ask as Carter (1987, p. xxi) asked: 'Before the name: what was the place like before it was named?'



*Figure 12.3:* 'Bring your curiosity, bring your baggage'. 2007. Paul Lambeth. Oil on canvas, 45 × 45 cm. © The artist.

Another key purpose in choosing events of the Burke and Wills expedition as background research material was to provide a location in time and place for imaginative projection and reflection. During this process my focus shifted from responding to specific places to including non-specific places, by which I meant the spaces between places. That is not to say these places were not named or were not places with meaning, simply that my lack



of knowledge limited my access and ability for a framed cultural reading. My reading of place was a broken line with some in-between knowledge, either imagined or inherited. I was both insider and outsider to place (see Figure 12.4). As insider, knowledge of the Burke and Wills story provided meaning to the Dig tree site, an otherwise non-imagined place. As outsider, the journey to specific sites with attached non-Indigenous story such as the Dig tree, was predominantly a journey through unnamed territory. The Dig tree site has become a specific place for contemporary Australians; for a non-Indigenous coastal-dwelling outsider, the journey there was a generalist experience across unnamed unimagined no-man's land. The post-colonial map of physical place provided names of general areas only. Claiming physical ownership or knowledge of place may start with naming or renaming but belonging to place, feeling place, may require another level of connection. A connection developed through collective experience and continued analysis of our ongoing cultural narrative.



Figure 12.4: 'No matter, I am home in unknown place'. 2007. Paul Lambeth. Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm. © The artist.

My approach on this occasion, in responding to the Burke and Wills expedition

as background material for a visual artistic journey, was to avoid descriptive narrative or direct visual reference to the explorers themselves or to the detailed events of the expedition. However, I made direct reference to the events at Cooper Creek in the poems as a vehicle of representation and investigation of exultant ideas. Within my hierarchy of concerns was a comparative response to place between Burke and Wills and myself. This comparison was informed by researched accounts and imagined views of expedition events.

In my imagined readings of the expedition I considered the nature of the individual characters of Burke and Wills using a culturally powerful image of misplaced optimism, that of Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*, a story of appalling innocence in the face of overwhelming odds. I overtly superimposed the relationship between Don Quixote de la Mancha and his blindly faithful squire Sancho Panza over that of the central characters in our Burke and Wills story. I pictured Burke as an anti-hero, an Irish-Australian version of Alonso Quixano, the protagonist in *Don Quixote*, a character parodying chivalrous unworldly behaviour. In my construction William John Wills became Burke's Sancho Panza, an unquestioning servant, and Julia Matthews, stage actress and unattainable object of fascination to Burke, his Dulcinea del Toboso.

My imagining of the intense drama surrounding the last days of Burke and Wills on Cooper Creek in 1861 occupied a key position in my creative thinking. The Dig tree provided an organic site integral to the imaginative leap required for a creative representation in image and text form. I realised that it was not important that my images narrated details of specific place – components of place in time or in geography – but that they suggested place and became place themselves. In essence, geographic place kicked them into the world and human creative place nurtured them to image form (see Figure 12.5).



Figure 12.5: 'I breathe your dust you breathe mine'. 2007. Paul Lambeth. Oil on canvas, 45 x 45 cm. © The artist.

As I came to understand, and inserted in my free-verse response to that investigation:

*But place is now here  
The same place as home  
I can become this place  
This place can become me  
No matter which way I come from  
This does not take sense, just sensibility*

For the purposes of this project I attempted to view the gap in experience of place between Indigenous Australians and my own, hinging the arguments at the point of specific versus non-specific place. I suggested that Indigenous Australians' formal connection to land, inherited through story, was often expressed as specific to place. In comparison, I was connected to many places through personal and family experiences. Often, connection to specific places was a circumstance of employment or real estate ownership, rather than by cultural inheritance. My question, in light of this investigation and the title question, was whether this condition meant my connection to place was more generic than that of Indigenous Australians. While my connection to place was through experience of land, it was also informed by contemporary experience of nationhood and

internationalism. Abstracting my response to place broadened my perspective, consistent with the initial artistic plan.

My experience in reading the story of this land from a post-colonial point of view often involved recognition of overlays. The most apparent and dramatic was the overlay of the European perspective on an Indigenous sensibility, understandable both in terms of traditional European colonial dominance and the intangible nature of Indigenous knowledge to a European sensibility. As this chapter took focus from a Visual Arts-based form of research, I understood I should not think of the outcome only in rational objective terms, but should produce images and text in response to the conceptual framework I had set. After reading a wide range of literature, some solid and some of questionable quality, I used the *vers libre* form of poetry to dig into the content and respond to the human qualities embedded in the accounts of what happened in 1861. In addition to the reading, I meandered backwards and forwards across the route taken by the Burke and Wills expedition in the 1860s.

Robert O'Hara Burke

*Summer is not a time for cultural superimposition  
Bowl-shaped sky rolling over thick horizons  
Caught between gulf and temperate country  
Intense long hot flame days  
Bitter cold nights, flickered warm light on camel and horse  
In furnace draught the human heart projects no heat  
Scraggly figures in gibber and sand  
More than cultural blindness places them here  
An experience too intense to bear for long  
But trust in providence and classical thought  
Whilst others live light, dark thoughts weigh heavy  
Blood in veins flow slow, nostrils burn  
False knowledge rises to the surface  
Even with survival in sight, no matter the pledge  
Bleached bones will tell the story, of Nardoo struggle  
Caught between death and life with knowledge of one  
Glory is gone, the imagined nirvana, lost*

*If you were here,  
in the tracks of the hapless  
Coming in the skin of an outsider  
With unnecessary tools though aplenty  
In this place, at this time, how would you cope  
Earth red inflame your soul without reprieve  
It would be the same for you, same end  
There would be nothing more to prop you  
From time afar we know what they came for  
This was not a prize to be had by stealth  
Leave the trodden path and pay the price  
Look behind you, see where you've come  
A life, a path, a death. Same as here, though shorter  
The meaning is here, tragic as it feels  
When complete death enters  
Surely this had meaning, small meaning  
If we could only be here to see the summary  
I hope they get us right, because this is the place*

*An end in itself, far from the womb but not so far  
The inland sea does not exist, a dry sandy sea*

*But place is now here  
The same place as home  
I can become this place  
This place can become me  
No matter which way I come from  
Or which time I come from  
This does not take sense, just sensibility  
Because, the place is here before you  
You learn the place the place does not learn you  
Bring your curiosity, bring your baggage  
Bow to the essence, pray to the primal  
This is not a dead heart, the colour of soil and blood  
There is life in the dead ancestors here, we are lucky  
They cannot speak with us, we must learn from the knowers  
Theirs is a language beyond life, beyond now  
My rags are disintegrating, like my flesh  
I cannot sense any flesh in the brittle dry  
Even our words hang in the air  
It is we, our bones  
Who mark the end of this story  
I breathe your dust you breathe mine  
Our dust is our story  
Let others despair, they breathe air  
It is the flies that carry the flesh  
Get them out of eyes and mouth  
Let them become sand like the rest of us  
It is the flies that make me irritable  
I cannot laugh at flies*

*The river down there, the fire here  
Far from what I thought mattered  
Neither river nor fire care  
If ours is a symbolic sacrifice  
It is ours alone  
Our bones shall become sand*

*They can bury our sand  
Because we have forgotten the civilised  
Not such a quiet place after all  
Our thoughts only matter if found*

*There never was certainty  
Equipment made us believe so  
Do you remember the equipment  
It made us do what we did  
But at night it forgot it was we  
It was we who carried it to new meaning  
I have never seen a black flame  
Can you see the black flame  
It is not the flame of home  
Death must not be ready yet  
But we are surrounded by death  
We must not feel special  
Does no sound mean death  
No sound moves over the sand  
There are curious eyes for death  
Coming from their smoky fires  
A kindness they bring, at a distance  
We are strange when alive  
What must we be like near death  
They still come  
I don't stop the wind now  
It moves right through me  
Face down in the sand  
I have no energy for self reflection  
And what a nonsense that would be anyway  
To scrutinise myself like a stranger  
Past masters look down on me  
But soon I will look down on them  
Or is it the kindly dark faces of my dream  
Faces baked in clay, of the earth  
I am not alarmed by them  
I assume I know them though not intimately  
We are the same, we are not the other*



*They know that, maybe it is not too late for me  
Suddenly I recognise them, can I proceed  
The wind is again against me  
My problem is I can't see the line  
What is now and what was then  
There is no path to tread  
Without comprehension I exclaim, this is easy  
What is this absurd drama which hasn't yet been invented  
There is no concept driving this pattern  
My uncertainty drives this pattern  
If I pray, would it make a difference  
No matter, I am home in unknown place  
The future is here at last  
Sung with another's voice  
My taste for salvation has gone  
Yesterday was another world  
These are not my words  
These are the words of the eternal  
My tongue does not speak, it is swollen  
I have not been to this place  
But this place claims me as its own  
There is an essential piece of me somewhere else  
But only words shall retrieve it  
If not soon I shall belong to somewhere else  
My body will follow my mind  
And think ahead to new times and belongings  
My death a royal gift, me the King  
But these are warm thoughts and I am cold  
These are thoughts with promise  
But I taste no sweetness of future  
I fall under my own weight of pulse  
And the dark force knowledge re-enters  
Angry I rage at my own recklessness  
Before laughing with a trickle of strength  
Am I destined to cringe in shame at my human failure  
The motives weren't mine alone  
But I shall be remembered  
You once saw me as honourable, a fool's vision*

*The stains on my shirt are not honour  
They seep from my human self  
Keep your vision and my spirit will live  
Though don't expect a valediction  
I have gambled my last*

*Green Southern gardens would complement inland red  
Can they live side by side or do they need to let go of one another  
Life cannot live with death, not with our lot anyway  
It is just the way we see it  
We need the other to position ourselves  
This makes a long road to liberation  
A long way to future love of country, of self  
On my death sand I can feel attachment to place  
The things place brings, wealth and security  
I sought them myself  
But they vanish at the touch  
Becoming less important at each historical decade  
Gone before they are realised*

*I am warm again  
Warm in feeling  
In this place  
Without apparent connection  
Will others share their genius  
I wanted to share the future  
But mine is to myth  
Separated from the thing I once was  
Ironically more a part of this place than those who survive me  
Forgotten at home remembered here  
Mine will be a strange remembrance  
The hapless explorer lost at home  
Home is the easiest place to be lost  
If you do not have the knowledge  
I cannot walk backwards to the place of knowing  
That is before others  
There will be much ado about our deaths  
Many will duck and weave*

*You see, we were the instruments of others' dreams as well  
These men shall become forgotten, we will be antique ideas  
This is our inheritance from place, a fortune you might say  
To inherit we needed to be lost*

*That crow there, shoot it  
Here is my pistol I cannot hand it to you  
The fire still burns you can eat  
Your dry coarse tongue will rasp the crow's bones  
One bang and you can live  
Stay alive, tell our story, get it right  
The fire still burns*

*Why is this so hard  
The exploration was difficult but this is impossible  
Is it easier to die with love  
In the hands of love  
Making dust from my shirt, between thumb and index finger  
I still breathe air not dust*

*False notions of dark knowledge suggest a new chapter  
Why then does this feel final  
Realisation tells me this is so  
While my mind is active tell me what you think  
Share with me my own perceptions  
Out with bragging, we have lost  
Let our thoughts dance but not as an epitaph  
As living words with future  
Can those at the fires hear our words  
Will we join their dead, or do we go to our own  
Do I become part of their history, their place  
It is getting dark we have no light to think  
I thought our history was far away but now I am unsure*

*If I could sing, I would sing right now  
A simple song of regret.*

William John Wills

*The limited cold knowledge I hold cannot be held for long,  
In the strong Earth God presence of this place  
How long would it take to know this God, me of Euclidean God  
I thought I had no heart for hand of providence  
Youthful blind trust I have had, in the charisma of man  
In the impetuous energy of the glory moment  
And yet behind this apparent trust lurks self doubt  
Though not enough to commend me to God  
If God is a place, then we are lost  
More lost than our people in places of their making  
It helps me, knowing you will at least remember  
My energy skills and attributes spent in a year  
A man not of God ought not to wish worship  
Whilst my frailty brings clarity, it also brings fear  
Unpropitious, not the dream of my childhood  
Against the grain of all we discussed, son to father, boy to man, man to man  
The smell of smoke to my left, near my feet  
And thoughts of continuation occupy me for a moment  
There seems plenty of time to wallow in a thought, strange  
With so little time  
I can see dark basalt in my mind's eye, cool to touch,  
Heavy and hard, unbothered by time  
There is no depth and no surface to these thoughts  
In a frayed life, from a time of care and learning  
I cannot hear other men, other voices  
No cries of recognition, or yelps of pain  
No wail of arrival  
No doubt, oppressed by the slow time of the present  
Should I be anxious, if so about what  
I can see through deception, more clearly than before  
Or is that just the dawn light  
There is no emotion in my feeble state  
Cry I would if I could, dry and cold  
I never considered myself powerful  
Now I know, life is power itself*

*Where are the others, by the river  
Drifting on life water to what destination  
My quiet domestic dreams of glory, quietly held  
Look at my toes, withered flowers  
Not fit for glory*

*You will only know me as a young man  
Only my bones will age my superficial thought  
My skills brought us here with your regret  
Gray buried already, our deaths synchronised  
Though not yet known,  
As we lifted burial mound rocks  
A man of the sea to die in the desert  
And what could we do, all so close  
Our pasts could not carry us now  
If we were philosophers, we would have stayed at home  
Or come anyway, but understood why  
Can I leave something behind, some wisdom  
He had his charisma, I my algebraic mind  
Beneath we were all terrified by the space  
No respite from space, nowhere to hide  
I think that is why Gray gave in  
His torment my disgrace  
And the blowing wind across the ripple river  
Brings with it the sigh I feel  
Though showing none of the heat fury we know is here*

*You told me not to live for regret, I obeyed  
The sentiment of regret will not be seated at the fire of future place makers  
So tell me, the direction from here, if you know  
My future is your future though on your own  
Because I am not the same man you farewellled and never will be  
We were good, as father and son, equal minds  
I had not imaged this as my destination  
But now I am here I can see it clearly  
It was here all along*



*But we were not acquainted  
And now that we are, time shall slide  
This is the perpetual journey*

*I can see the stars, through shadowed branches  
Days, weeks, months ago I saw them as an objective observer  
Reading their information in the language of man  
Now they tell me what I need to know, in the language of the universe  
My dry curled fingers, my almost visible bones  
In life this would be an omen, in death an image  
Too late for the felt terror  
In the knowledge that life is present, but curiosity absent  
My selfish curiosity was my strength  
But what was my occupation within which I spent this strength  
Explorer, barely a vocation, place was already here  
We could not intersect with this place  
At this time  
We could not give to this place, this place took from us  
Until we had nothing left to give  
We ought not to have asked for so much  
We got lost in the light, lost in time and space  
We surrendered, but too late  
Now I wait the moment, if it happens in a moment  
This place takes more than the motivation we had to offer  
Now we are conquered, thought and action inconsequential  
After a conquest based on movement  
Even movement is now of no consequence  
A trace of consciousness all I have, my last left freedom  
Any significance lost on us.*

## Conclusion

My original intent in choosing poetry to explore my response to the research was to allow an opportunity to follow an imaginative path in written form to augment the images. At the same time, using language in poetic form allowed me to compound the subjective qualities intrinsic to my painting process. However, during the creative process over several months, the poem evolved to a greater extent than I had imagined and as a result became central to the methodology and outcome of the research rather than a reflective addendum to what I originally considered to be core explanatory writing. As the work progressed the themes in the poem emerged as both central and critical to the whole project.

Indeed, echoes of the poem began to be heard in both the main body of this chapter and the images, as a result I deliberately moved from viewing the poem as an addendum to the more traditional academic writing and the paintings, to recognising and presenting it as a formal and hopefully powerful conclusion to my intellectual journey.

In utilising the poetic form within an explanatory text I attempted to bridge what I saw as a gap between written text and the visual language of paintings. My intent was that the poems conjure reflective images of the investigation and parallel the poetic visual aspirations of the figures. To this end, the ideas evident in the poems aimed to both tease out arguments exposed in the text and to synthesise the felt experiences of the painted subjects. The language style or use of language in the poems grew to be as important to me as the style of painting.

## A comment on style and intent

The first part of this poem, an investigation into the legend of Burke and Wills, was written in the first-person omnipresent voice of exploration leader Robert O'Hara Burke, imagined as speaking to comrade

John King, as Burke lay dying on the banks of the Cooper. King was the sole survivor of the party of four who travelled from Cooper Creek to the Gulf and back. The selection of this imagined perspective of dying Burke to survivor King was a key notion in the narrative perspective. The story, told from Burke's perspective as a dying man, highlighted the part King played in representing a notion of survival even when all had gone hopelessly wrong. In this way the poem focused not on Burke's hopes of physical survival but on the survival of a heroic story in which Burke played the leading character.

The second part of the poem was an imaginative construction of a conversation of William John Wills to his father. Records indicate that Wills was very close to his father, the two sharing a profound scientific curiosity about life and a strong emotional connection. This conjunction of rational scientist and devoted son provided creative tension within the work. It is also a matter of record that Wills' father was apprehensive about his son's participation in the expedition and openly expressed that concern. As a result of their close emotional attachment and his premonition, Wills' father grieved deeply at the loss of his son. As a consequence, this somewhat ironic perspective of Wills speaking to his father is important to the structure of the poem. Wills' father was a dissenting voice in the lead-up to the expedition, speaking strongly about the situation that was putting his son in unnecessary danger. The dissenting voice continued after the death of his son and became an important part of the paradox associated with the enterprise that has been passed down to us. In writing this part of the poem I drew from my own experience as both a father and a son, understanding more acutely some of the anguish, deep emotion and loss that often attend the father-son relationship.

Overall, a central intent in developing the poem this way was to merge intensely

personal experiences, illustrated through the imagined voices of Burke and Wills, with more universal human themes of unrequited love, the hopeless search for glory, hubris and disaster. By riding on the back of the historical account of the Burke and Wills story I intended to tap and illuminate a story deeply embedded in the psyche of this nation.

In conclusion, my aspiration was to access grand themes of life within my work. The personal and specific approaches taken to its creation provided the navigational compass points for the journey.

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# Alfred Howitt and the erasure of Aboriginal history

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## Introduction: exploration and the spatial politics of settler colonialism

As collective hopes about Burke and Wills faded in the middle of 1861, 31-year-old Alfred Howitt was selected by the exploration committee to lead a relief expedition (see Figure 13.1). As his diaries were published in the colonial press over the next six months, settlers noted with surprise how easily Howitt moved through a landscape that had so clearly alienated Burke and Wills; Howitt's party comfortably crossed racial and geographic frontiers beyond which so many European men had seemed unwelcome. Negotiating the other side of the frontier with ease, they located a near-death King and the bodies of Burke and Wills. They even returned to central Australia on a second expedition to retrieve

the explorers' remains for a state burial. Unlike Burke's and Wills' experiences with 'troublesome natives', their 'terrifying thirst' and their apparent bewilderment at both central Australia and its inhabitants, Howitt's diaries were littered with examples of his intimate engagement with various Aboriginal communities and, perhaps more importantly, acknowledgements of the ways in which his success had depended upon Aboriginal knowledge. This is surprising when we consider the ways in which ideas about racial difference in the mid 19th century necessarily created rigid interpersonal frontiers; meaningful interactions between European and Aboriginal people needed to first dismantle a border created by condescension and incomprehension.

The idea of the frontier has performed tremendous cultural and political work in the history of colonialism in Australia (Russell



*Figure 13.1:* Alfred Howitt, 1861. Batchelder & O'Neill. Photograph. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H37475/26.



2001). The notion of a clear boundary between settled and unsettled space and the assumption that exploration would incrementally move that boundary towards complete mastery made the disordered and uncertain project of settlement look historically inevitable to both 19th-century settlers and their historians. The frontier was always an exercise in narrating and imagining colonisation rather than a reflection of its material progress. The stories explorers told about their frontier crossings could not help but reverberate with these politics. Indeed, as Phillips (1997, pp. 14,70) argued, narratives about exploration 'promoted support for and involvement in imperialism' because they usually legitimated European practices of 'enclosing, defining, coding, orienting, structuring and controlling space' at the expense of other forms of knowledge.

In the case of settler colonies such as Australia, the politics of space were and are even more central to the colonial project. From the late 18th century, as Wolfe (1994, pp. 94–96) argued, settler political and legal cultures were structured by an imperative to secure exclusive control of Australian space; the denial of Aboriginal sovereignty – through the Crown's refusal to 'treat' with the 'natives' – revealed these brute territorial logics. Simply by staying at home, then, Aboriginal people both materially obstructed and morally challenged the legal 'ruses' of settler colonialism (Morgensen 2011, p. 7). In this context there is no possibility that a narration of Burke and Wills, or indeed Howitt, could or can be stripped of a relationship to these contested politics. Even the remarkably persistent notion of Howitt's impressive competence – in contrast to the 'melancholic' tragedy of Burke and Wills – needs to be understood as part of the cultural mechanisms through which colonialism is made to look normal rather than politically outrageous. We might usefully consider, then, how various representations of Howitt's expedition have been implicated in the cultural politics of settler colonialism and

– more specifically – how understandings of the relationship between Howitt's party and Aboriginal people were transformed in the years after Howitt returned 'home' to cheering crowds in Melbourne.

Australian stories about exploration have long evoked specific emotional landscapes. As Curthoys (1999, pp. 22–25) noted, rather than mobilising the 'conventional' imperial tropes of spatial mastery and control, settler narratives have long stressed 'struggle, courage and survival, amidst pain, tragedy and loss'. These remarkably persistent ideas about the origins of settler society imagine an 'alienating ... terrifying, hostile and dangerous ... land' as the 'obstacle ... a settler hero must fight.' Burke and Wills, as Curthoys noted, are ideal examples of the ways in which the idea of 'heroic defeat' at the face of this opponent creates a history and mythology of victimhood that, ironically, secures a settler claim to cultural legitimacy by marginalising the actual victims of colonisation – namely, Aboriginal people.

However, Howitt's successes and their remembrances confound an easy accommodation with settler attachments to failure and loss. The story of Howitt is exceptional because he seemed so comfortable in a space that so many of his contemporaries saw as a 'white men's grave' (*The Argus*, 28 December 1861, p. 5). As a newspaper report commented upon Howitt's retirement from public life in 1900, he seemed to demonstrate 'the essentials of the leader of such an expedition ... All seems to have been perfectly easy and unexciting ... had [Howitt] been the leader of the [original] exploring expedition there would have been no failure and no loss of life' (*The Argus*, 1 August 1900, p. 7).

Historians in late modern Australia have largely accepted this assessment. Moorehead (1987, p. 127) suggested that he was 'really exceptional ... he was a steady and intelligent man, an anthropologist, a geologist and an excellent bushman'. Other accounts (Day 2003, p. 109) similarly noted his 'rapid

progress' across the continent's interior because he was 'such a reliable expedition leader'. Bonyhady did not shy away from the inevitable critique that Howitt's performance suggested about the initial party and its leadership. He argued (1991, p. 161) that Howitt 'provided that combination of qualifications which Burke had lacked'. Howitt 'was so well qualified that many people lamented the fact that he had not been around to lead the original expedition' (Murgatroyd 2002, p. 277).

Howitt seemed to be at 'home' in the Australian landscape because he made exploration look easy and unexciting. However, the comforts of home and belonging are not produced without political implications. According to Sopher (1979, p. 129), the feeling of being at home is produced by having control over who may or may not enter. In the Australian colonies and then nation, this was precisely the form of control denied to Aboriginal people in their own homeland. The repeated assertions of Howitt's comfort and competency (both by Howitt and his historians) are necessarily riven with those politics. Moreover, as Keary's (1992) careful work showed, Howitt's initial diaries and despatches acknowledged a complex and sometimes ambivalent relationship between the relief expedition and the Aboriginal peoples whose territory they were moving through (and, equally importantly, their dependence on Aboriginal knowledge for their survival). Only in the decades after that success was Howitt's ease explained by his skill alone. Although Howitt noted the importance of 'good relations with the natives' and various moments when the relief expedition had been sustained by Aboriginal knowledge and expertise, by the time of federation and Howitt's death his success was often explained by the fact that he was a 'master of nature's secrets' and a 'fearless and energetic bushman' (*Launceston Examiner* 17 March 1908, p. 3).

This chapter begins by tracing how Howitt acknowledged his engagements

with Aboriginal people in his published diaries. Importantly, these were not 'private' accounts; they were intended for publication in colonial newspapers as the expedition unfolded (we need to resist the temptation to grant them the authenticity of the personal). It then considers how Howitt incrementally removed that acknowledgement between 1862 and his death. As he became a living object of national memory, his narratives were reshaped in accordance with the cultural needs of settler nationhood. Much like Burke's body in the painting produced a few years after his death by William Strutt, Howitt began to drape his narrative in the comforting elegies of imperial hubris. With this in mind, the chapter then traces the disappearance of Aboriginal people from representations in visual art related to Howitt, Burke and Wills. As these events took on mythological shape, any Aboriginal presence became difficult to contain within the narrative and visual frame. Their removal implies that responsibility for this wider silence should not fall at Howitt's feet alone – wider cultural forces made acknowledgement of Aboriginal historical importance an impossibility. The chapter closes by considering some of the political implications these different rememberings might have for notions of territorial entitlement. What do the different modes of representation reveal about the political faultlines of settler colonialism? Who did the stories suggest was at home on the other side of the frontier? What do the changing stories reveal about the connections between crossing the frontier and the blunt expropriations of settler colonialism?

## Howitt on the 'other side of the frontier'

While his success as leader of the Burke and Wills relief expedition made Howitt a household name in 1860s Melbourne, it was his later anthropological work that secured his historical reputation. Indeed, Howitt's anthropological works of the later 19th

century made important contributions to international debates about social evolution and are still mined for anthropological information today. Having experienced a stirring of ethnographic interest during the Burke and Wills relief expedition, Howitt later published works on the 'Cooper's Creek Aborigines' (Howitt 1878) but his reputation in colonial Victoria was earned by his capacity to cross geographic rather than racial frontiers. Moreover, while the anthropological writings for which Howitt became well-known in later life asserted an insurmountable distance between European and Aboriginal people in evolutionary terms, his experiences of exploration seemed to not only cross those boundaries but to reverse the implied hierarchies of knowledge and expertise.

Howitt had arrived in Melbourne from England in 1852 with his father and brother, intending to tour the goldfields and, at least on his father's part, produce literary accounts of life in the colonies. When his father and brother returned in 1854, Howitt elected to stay and soon fulfilled his mother's prediction that he would 'someday ... be a backwoodsman' (Stanner 1972). He wrote, in a much-cited letter to his family in England, that 'I have a tremendous hankering after tent life ... I am sure that in some state of existence I must have been a blackfellow' (Skeritt 2011, p. 46).

Howitt's letter suggested a sense of belonging that his subsequent admirers have all too often repeated; he seemed comfortable, capable and at home in the Australian landscape. We might speculate, however, that in Howitt's mind, comfort and belonging in the Australian landscape was signified by Aboriginality – feeling at home in Australia required, at least in one way, learning how to become 'a blackfellow'.

This tempered identification with 'blackfellows' did not occur overnight. Howitt's initial reaction to an encounter with some Wiradjuri peoples was disgust (Walker 1971, p. 145) – he soon realised,

however, that successful exploration required engagement with Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. Working as a drover in the mid 1850s, Howitt was chosen by a Melbourne syndicate to lead an exploration to investigate the pastoral potential of the Lake Eyre region in 1859. After his successful leadership of an expedition of which Aboriginal guides formed an integral part, he was chosen by the Victorian government to survey alpine country in Victoria in 1859 (Mt Howitt is a self-proclaimed monument to his efforts).

Once it became apparent that the Burke and Wills expedition was in serious trouble (an eventuality that Howitt had predicted) and the Exploration Committee decided to send relief missions, 100 letters of interest were sent to the committee, Howitt's among them. His extensive experience and reputation made him an almost universally supported choice (which was unusual for a committee so frequently divided) and his subsequent successes seemed to justify that good faith. Upon locating King and learning that the party had succeeded in reaching the Gulf of Carpentaria, Howitt was bitterly disappointed that this curtailed the possibility of making the historic crossing himself. After locating and burying the remains of the leaders, Howitt returned southward, noting that his animals were in better shape than when they departed and the party had enough supplies for another four months (Howitt 1857–1907, 18 October 1863).

Howitt's accounts of exploration were not straightforward mobilisations of master-scripts of exploration and inevitable European possession. His diaries about the Burke and Wills relief expedition revealed a much more complex engagement with notions of belonging, geographic knowledge and territorial entitlement. Colonial readers were challenged by a story of 'exploration' that refused a simple script of European mastery or melancholic loss. If the settler colonial project was structured by the

relentless imperative to secure complete and exclusive European sovereignty, Howitt's diaries narrated an experience that could not be contained by this fantasy of complete possession; the space beyond the frontier was clearly somebody else's home and Howitt's successful negotiation of it was made possible by his capacity to recognise both this territorial fact and its associated hierarchies of geographic expertise.

As the party made its way to Cooper Creek and beyond, Howitt noted they traversed the territories of three distinct language groups, each with its own system of managing and monitoring strangers (Allen 2011, p. 248). At Menindee the party had engaged two Aboriginal guides, Sandy and Frank, and as they moved northward it became clear that although the guides could read the landscape for water and food they struggled to communicate with Aboriginal peoples from other language groups. In early September, Howitt encountered:

*five blackfellows on the opposite side of [a] creek ... as usual [they] commenced shouting and waving their arms. We coo-eeed in return and one waded across ... the others then followed him ... Sandy said he could only understand [a few] words they said; but I believed it was that he could not understand them at all, as he was not able to make them comprehend that I wished to know if they had seen any stray camels about (Howitt 1857-73, 9 September 1861).*

Howitt's diaries noted another example of these local regimes of possession and their effects on his Aboriginal guide. As the party moved southward from Dampurnoo on the second expedition to retrieve the remains of Burke and Wills, Howitt was shocked to notice that 'our guide, Winkely, was very loath to leave his tribe and country, and had a great cry on his horse at starting – blubbing with his knuckles in his eyes like a schoolboy after the holidays' (Howitt 1857-73, 23 April 1862).

Howitt became increasingly aware that they were continually crossing borders

they did not comprehend. The European category of 'blackfellow', which was applied to Aboriginal people across the continent, ignored their nuanced systems of identity, language and spatial proprietorship. Howitt's diaries revealed a party always struggling to figure out who belonged where.

Both expeditions were closely monitored and managed as they moved across the boundaries of various Aboriginal groups. They were 'constantly visited by our black friends, who have an extra-ordinary curiosity as regards our doings' (Howitt 1857-73, 26 April 1862). As a member of Howitt's 1861 party noted, they frequently observed 'blacks stealthily watching our movements from a distance and travelling through the long grass in the direction we ourselves were going' (Welch 1857-73, 13 September 1861). Howitt remarked, when they reached Poria Creek, that the party could almost always see 'very large ... signal fires ... as we were travelling ... [these were] no doubt intended to announce our arrival' The expedition party was frequently accompanied by local Aboriginal guides (whether with the party or monitoring from the edges); movement from one territory to another was indicated by the seemingly sudden departure of one guide and the arrival of another (Howitt 1857-73, 1 September 1861).

In acts of more explicit monitoring and management in early October, the party encountered a group of Aboriginal people and soon came:

*to a friendly understanding by means of a few words I knew ... the promises of a knife [convinced] them to show me the way ... a jolly-looking young fellow ... took the lead ... I was very much amused at the ceremonious way in which my guide led the way, pointing out the best road and very earnestly making me notice the bushes in my way (Howitt 1857-73, 4 October 1861).*

At times these conventions of stewardship assisted Howitt's party to find places to camp. When the second expedition travelled

north from their camp at Merrimoko near the Mitkacaldratillie Lakes they were guided by a 'blackfellow who professed to know the country for several days'. This guide, perhaps according to local conventions, brought the party directly into the path of a 'camp of natives ... [who] were first much alarmed, but became friendly – pointing out a place for us to camp and sending down a wooden bowl of seed' (Howitt 1857–73, 17 April 1861). The next day, as the party moved towards Bateman's Creek, two men from the camp:

*led us ... across a very finely grassed tract of sandhills and saltbush flats to a dry lake covered with 'pappar' grass, and at the east side of which a creek came in. There were two water holes here – one nearly dry, the other good for a couple of months. Leaving this, we proceeded to the east of north, over some high red sandhills covered with porcupine grass, and then suddenly turned to the northward for about three miles, when we came in sight of the timber on this creek. (A number of natives camped by a large waterhole appeared to be friendly, and, as usual, pointed out a place for our camp.)*

This was not a party of European men traversing the unknown – this was a group of strangers being stewarded through a landscape, being shown where to camp and how to sustain themselves. A few days later, Howitt made decisions based on whether the guides were willing to accompany them northward, where the men asserted there was no water. Howitt 'considered it would be the wisest course to make use of these natives in more fully exploring this tract of country, than in endeavouring to penetrate more to the northward on a route where they refused to accompany us' (Howitt 1857–73, 23 April 1862).

Perhaps the best-known example of the European dependence on Aboriginal expertise and kindness across the entire Burke and Wills expedition was the way in which King was taken in by the Yandruwandha people who provided shelter and food until he was

'discovered' by Howitt. Once King was well enough to travel, Howitt decided to return southward and would not leave without registering his thanks. His diary noted that:

*two days after we camped here the natives left and have not been seen since. I could not think of leaving without showing them that we could appreciate and reward the kindness they had shown to Burke's party and particularly to King. For three miles we travelled over alluvial flats along the creek [till finally we found them] With the aid of King, I at last got them all seated before me, and distributed the presents, – tomahawks, knives, necklaces, looking-glasses, combs – amongst them ... [I] explained that these things were given to them for having fed King ... They left, making signs expressive of friendship, carrying their presents with them ... I feel confident that we have left the best impression behind us, and that the white fellows, as they ... call us, will be looked on henceforth as friends and that, in case of emergency, any one will receive the kindest treatment at their hands (Howitt 1857–73, 23 September 1861, 24 September 1861).*

Howitt's diaries warmly acknowledged the debts he and King owed to Aboriginal people throughout central Australia and it is not surprising that Howitt recognised this debt according to British conventions of cross-cultural engagement; he requested that the Exploration Committee produce a series of breastplates. These were inscribed with gratitude 'for the Humanity shewn to the Explorers Burke, Wills and King 1861'. On his second expedition Howitt presented the object he assumed would have more significance than a bag of flour to the Yandruwandha people.

## Howitt becomes an object of cultural memory

When Howitt returned to Melbourne in 1862, his role in the Burke and Wills saga



had secured him a place in what was fast becoming a crucial episode in colonial memory cultures. As he wrote in a letter to his mother, 'I have hardly had a moment free – what with the exploration Committee and the funeral and visits and calls and dinners ... I have even seen my name on a boat on the Yarra' (cited in Walker 1971, p. 145). It should be no surprise that he repeatedly provided public accounts of this experience over the next five decades. His early lectures – like one given in Bairnsdale in 1870, where Howitt's position as a local magistrate secured his place in the town's elite – acknowledged that the rescue mission had depended on 'black friends' for its success. Howitt noted that 'my comrades [and I] were not above taking a lesson from a blackfellow' about how to find food in a seemingly dry landscape. He described how the party located water in the Stony Desert because they followed advice from their 'black friends'. '[U]ndulation after undulation was crossed without change from the endless stone pavement' before the party, reluctantly following the advice of the 'black friends', made camp and waited, watching the dusk sky. When night fell, 'suddenly the air was alive with water-fowl ... squawking and trumpeting in a way that made us jump up in a hurry and endeavour in the darkness to find their course'. After passing over 'more stones' in that 'brown desert' they came to a sight that Howitt said he would 'never forget.' They suddenly found a landscape rich with 'water-holes and creeks, and lagoons on all sides, full to the brim'. Howitt's faith in their 'black friends revived' (cited in *Gippsland Times*, 15 March 1870, pp. 1–2).

However, Aboriginal people soon lost their place as important contributors to the success of the rescue mission, and became only incidental elements in Howitt's public narratives about Burke and Wills. Perhaps because Howitt's imaginative and material relation to Aboriginal people had been reoriented by a flowering anthropological interest, his narratives about Burke and

Wills began to marginalise the Aboriginal importance to the mission. He continued to acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal networks in sharing news about other members of the rescue mission who were no longer with the main party, but his public memories about Aboriginal people began to closely resemble the subjects he was starting to describe in his anthropological work. They became, like the objects of study described in his 1878 anthropological account of the 'Aborigines at Coopers Creek [,] just like children' rather than possessors of important knowledge about the Australian landscape (cited in Brough Smyth 1878, p. 303). The irony was that the anthropological detail in Howitt's 1878 account of these 'children' depended on the intimacies forged while relying on their superior knowledge during his expeditions. By 1890, when Howitt gave a lecture at Queen's College at the University of Melbourne, references to Aboriginal people had been reduced to observations about 'friendly relations' with 'natives' who could 'cause trouble' for any expedition (*The Argus*, 16 April 1890, p. 7); gone was any sense of their skill or expertise.

By the first decade of the 20th century, Howitt had become a living object of memory about early days of exploration in colonial Australia and an extremely influential person in Australian intellectual life. In the early years of Australian nationhood, Howitt was showered with honours that noted his 'good work as leader of the Burke and Wills Rescue Expedition' and his 'researches in the domain of Anthropology of Australian Aborigines ... original Geological and Botanical observation in Victoria [and] meritorious work over more than forty years in diffusing knowledge of Australian Natural History' (Walker 1971, p. 14).

In 1907 Howitt gave his inaugural presidential address to the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science, in which he accounted for the 'successes and failures' of Burke and Wills and their relief parties. He asserted that a 'series of

misfortunes' and 'errors of judgement on the part of Mr Burke' produced the 'disastrous ending' of their party. Unlike himself, Burke did not 'possess that kind of knowledge that is absolutely necessary to enable even the bravest and most determined man to be a successful leader of an expedition' (Howitt 1908, pp. 18–19).

His 1907 address noted that his own rescue mission had 'encountered blackfellows' at various moments and that they had played an important part in the discovery of King (after which he 'gave them presents' he 'thought they might have understood' were in recognition of their service to King). His debt to his Aboriginal guide for finding water in the Stony Desert seemed to have been forgotten; the party simply 'came across ... pools of water'. The desert was, unlike the disturbing spectre of his previous account, 'exactly as I expected'. Howitt acknowledged that his account about how the 'former mystery of central Australia became known' was of 'national importance' in a newly federated Australia. It would seem that, as the new nation took shape, Howitt found it impossible to acknowledge the important role his 'black friends' had played in the nation-forming episodes of colonial history. There seems to have been little space for an account of exploration in which Aboriginal people were participants, informants and sometimes collaborators.

## The great disappearing act

The gradual removal of Aboriginal people from Howitt's public narrations of the relief expeditions was not the only cultural site at which the silence became deafening. In many ways, Howitt's blind spots were sustained – if not directed – by a much wider erasure unfolding in public life. In the decades after 1861, paintings and drawings of Burke and Wills and of Howitt's relief missions reveal the ambivalent place Aboriginal people occupied in both colonial and national memory. Indeed, the history of artistic representations of Burke and Wills demonstrates the ways

in which spaces for Aboriginal people in Australian cultural memory began to close as the unruliness of public diaries, everyday reportage and expedition reports were transformed into a comfortingly tragic narrative about European exploration. Like Howitt's lectures, artistic representations of Howitt's involvement in the Burke and Wills mythology literally whitewashed Aboriginal people from the foreground. By the turn of the century, oil paintings such as William Strutt's well-known and deeply melancholic 'Burial of Burke' (1911) made for much more comforting and comprehensible memories because they created an imaginative landscape entirely populated by European men (see Figure 13.2). Like the body in this painting, Burke, Wills and Howitt were incrementally wrapped up in the symbolic and affective comforts of imperial adventure and its melancholic tragedies.

Indeed, the approaching prominence of Burke and Wills in the colonial imagination was already clear to observers in 1861. As Howitt wrote in a letter to his family that year, 'you will laugh when you hear that no less than five artists have commenced grand historical pictures of me burying Burke' (cited in Walker 1971, p. 132). As Smith (1971, p. 49) noted, 'heroes of the colonial frontier ... like Burke and Wills ... exercised an enormous emotional appeal' for artists and audiences alike from the mid 19th century. The expedition became a 'site of memory' (Nora 1989, p. 6) and public, popular and downright populist artists have



Figure 13.2: 'Burial of Burke'. 1911. William Strutt. State Library of New South Wales, Dixson Library. Call no. DL PXX3.

continually given its events emotional and narrative shape in Australian public life.

Strutt always claimed that the production of the 1911 oil painting was prompted by the memorialising imperatives of the Gilbee Bequest, which provided funds for the purchase of a painting of a crucial episode in Australian history (Bonyhady 1991, p. 132); seen in these terms the painting was produced as a commemorative piece. However, Strutt had been contemplating the episode since it unfolded. He was one of five artists who approached Howitt after his return in 1861; he produced a variety of sketches about both the initial party and the relief expeditions. Between 1861 and 1911, he consulted extensively with its subjects, noting that 'Welch had approved of this sketch ... and Mr Howitt said this is like the scene'. He was extremely proud of 'Burial' in artistic, emotional and historical terms. By 1911 he seemed convinced that the story of Burke and Wills centred as much around Howitt's melancholy rescue mission as the initial expedition.

Like his 1901 painting of the same title, Strutt's paintings in this later period were cultural 'Sentinels of Empire' in which European men struggled against inhospitable landscapes, explorers ventured into unknown territory and indigenous peoples either frolicked harmlessly or required armed and violent suppression. His paintings granted colonial figures a 'heroic monumentality' (Curnow 1980, p. 54). These were the kinds of stories that made empire look adventurous but comprehensible rather than brutal and unruly. Strutt's later work (like 'Burial') mobilised a series of ideas about racial difference and imperial adventure that offered powerful legitimacy to the notion that European men should take control of the imperial periphery.<sup>1</sup>

However, the sketches of the expedition Strutt completed between 1861 and 1911 revealed an imaginative landscape in which the rigid myths of empire and the powerful feelings they conjured (perhaps most

bluntly evoked by the prominence of the Union Jack in the 1911 painting), were less dominant. Just as the initial sketches of 'Burial' featured the much more emotionally troubling decomposing remains of Burke (rather than simply their imprint in the flag), Strutt's various studies for 'Burial' were much more varied in topic and tone. His earlier imaginings were not of a history populated by European men alone. In the immediate aftermath of the expedition, Strutt produced a powerful watercolour, 'Cooper's Creek blacks cover Burke's remains'. The wailing faces of this burial party suggested that Aboriginal people were crucial participants in the expedition history. Unlike the smooth melancholic stoicism of Howitt burying Burke, this was an episode in which Aboriginal people were both narratively and emotionally important. By the late 19th century, however, as Strutt chose an appropriate moment of the Burke and Wills expedition to memorialise, the potencies of imperial adventure and its associated melancholies proved more compelling. As Burke and Wills were incorporated into the realms of cultural memory, Aboriginal people were removed from its emotional landscape.

Other artistic representations of Howitt's relief mission shared Strutt's decision to shroud the less comforting elements of the expedition's history. The discovery of a severely malnourished King, supposedly by Howitt, was an extremely popular episode in images of the saga and early representations of the moment tended to keep the Yandruwandha firmly in the narrative frame. When King was discovered, he 'presented a melancholy appearance – wasted to a shadow, and hardly to be distinguished as a civilised being but by the remnants of clothes upon him' (Howitt 1857–73, 15 September 1861). King had survived only because the Yandruwandha people provided not only shelter, but food.

Importantly, Welch's diary revealed that Howitt was far removed from the moment of discovery (and neither was King prostrate in

a hut – a point which will become important). Welch had ridden ahead of the party and was:

*attracted by a couple of niggers ... [who] shouted loudly as soon as they saw me and vigorously pointed down the creek ... moving cautiously on through the undergrowth the blacks kept pace with me ... their cries increasing in volume and intensity ... the blacks drew hurriedly back to the top of the opposite bank, shouting and gesticulating wildly, and leaving one solitary figure ... as I passed it tottered, threw up its hands in the attitude of prayer, and fell on the ground ... I was soon beside it, hastily asking, 'Who in the name of wonder are you?' 'I am King, sir'*

*and again he fell to the ground (Welch 1857–73, 15 September 1861).*

King's 'discovery' was, more than likely, due to Yandruwandha emissaries actually leading Welch to the frail and nearly unrecognisable figure.

Cuthbert Clarke's drawings made for the hastily published 1862 pamphlet, 'The diaries of Burke and Wills' imagined a moment in which 'the blacks *inform*[ed] John King that the Whitefellows are coming' (emphasis added, see Figure 13.3). Similarly, S.T. Gill's 1862 watercolours attributed importance to this moment; he concluded his Burke and Wills series with 'Discovery of King with the natives by Howitt' (see Figure 13.4). While Gill clearly altered the personnel present at that moment (Welch was most likely separated from his party when he 'discovered' King) and changed King's location (placing him within a tent in a Yandruwandha encampment), he nonetheless

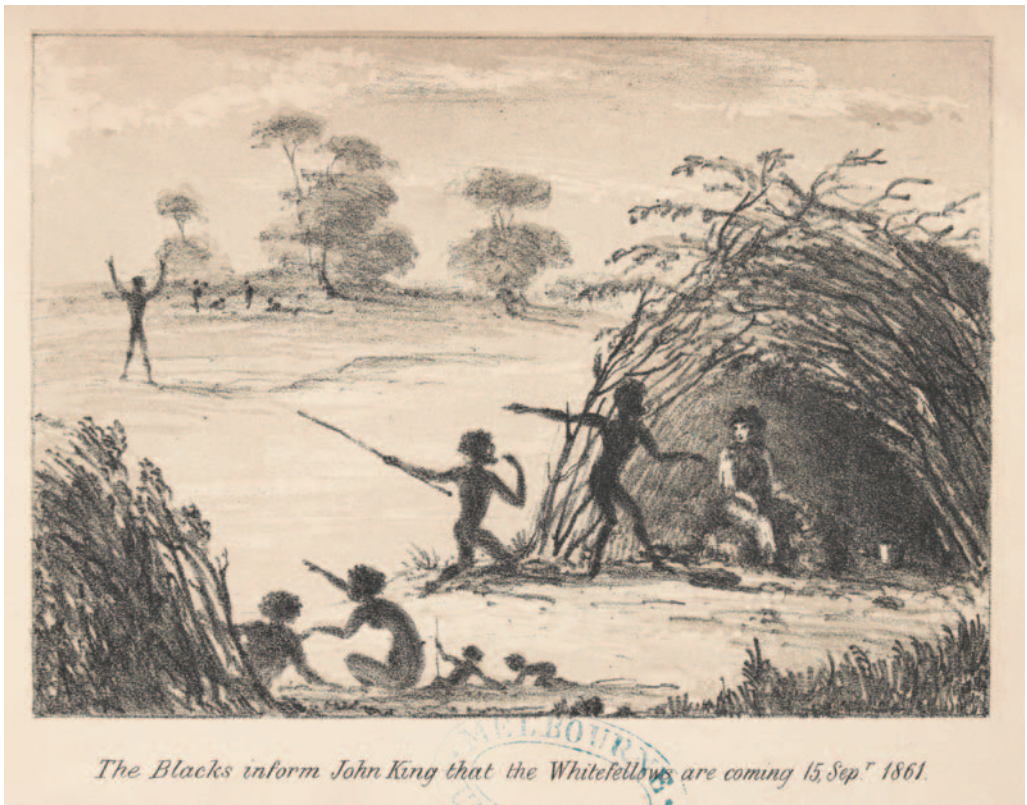


Figure 13.3: 'The Blacks inform John King that the whitefellows are coming 15 Sept. 1861'. De Gruchy & Leigh. State Library of Victoria Rare Books Collection. Accession no. 30328102131801/9.





Figure 13.4: 'Discovery of King with the natives by Howitt'. S.T. Gill. State Library of New South Wales, Dixon Galleries. Accession no. DGA 15 no. 10.

maintained the importance of Yandruwandha people in the narrative. In Gill's portrayal, King and Howitt were united by Aboriginal men.

As public memorial cultures took shape, the centrality of the Yandruwandha was forgotten. After Sir Charles Darling unveiled Charles Summer's now-famous 'Burke and Wills Monument' to the 'melancholy end' of Burke and Wills, before an impressive crowd on Collins St, Melbourne, it was another 18 months before the installation of the four bas-reliefs around the plinth that narrated the story of Burke and Wills. By the late 1870s, crowds were nearly always present at the base of the statue, 'inspecting ... the bas-reliefs ... with something of the reverential interest that ... archaeologists bring to bear on the painting on the inner walls of a

tomb on the Nile' (*Australasian Sketcher*, 26 December 1874, p. 27). First was 'Departure from Melbourne', followed by 'Return to the Dig Tree', 'Death of Burke' and finally 'Howitt's Rescue of King.' The plinth and its bas-reliefs provided the narrative frame for the elegiac statues of Burke and Wills above. The final moment was transformed into Howitt leading a party of white men into a camp of seated Aboriginal people and King. The Yandruwandha had been reduced to placid figures waiting to be discovered by Europeans.

Two decades later, when the popular Australian periodical *Illustrated Australian News* (1 January 1891, pp. 8–9) published an account of the history of exploration in Australia, it suggested that the 'melancholy' tale of Burke and Wills was 'at once the brightest and the darkest page on the strange and eventful story of Australian exploration'. In the only full-page illustration in the luxurious supplement, F.A. Sheap's 'Finding of King' repeated the now-conventional form of placing two European figures at the centre of the narrative (see Figure 13.5). The Yandruwandha were firmly relegated to the edge of the story.

The changing fate of the Yandruwandha in public art and Strutt's decision to memorialise a moment solely with European people, reveal the ways in which Howitt's expedition was incrementally whitewashed



Figure 13.5: 'The Finding of King, the Survivor'. 1891. F.A. Sheap after J. Macfarlane. *Illustrated Australian News*, 1 January 1891, National Library of Australia.



in the second half of the 19th century. These various works seem to confirm Healy's (1994, p. 132) suggestion that for much of the 19th and 20th centuries white Australians experienced their history as a series of collective psychological monuments which would comfort through their familiarity. The comforting tragedy of Burke and Wills and Howitt's seemingly melancholic mission were created not simply by the events themselves, but by choices about which of their elements to place in the foreground of colonial and national consciousness. The elevation of Burke and Wills to colonial and national myth – which began the moment they departed from Royal Park – was made possible by attempts to expel Aboriginal people from the troubling position they occupied in a story about European exploration. In a collectively remembered story about crossed frontiers, foolhardy explorers and inhospitable (possibly uninhabitable) outbacks, the presence of Aboriginal people within, alongside, against and around the exploration parties might have made for uncertain mythological terrain.

## Conclusion

Attwood (2009, pp. 1–13) noted that questions about the legitimacy of colonisation have haunted Australian public life throughout the history of white settlement; the ways in which individual explorers and their different encounters with the Australian landscape are mourned and celebrated must, then, be seen as an engagement with these moral dilemmas. Before resisting the notion that seemingly humane and heroic explorers such as Howitt are implicated in the pointy end of settler colonial politics, we might usefully remember that at the time there was no question that Burke and Wills were paving the way for denser European encroachments into Aboriginal territory. Botanist and Exploration Committee member Mueller proudly asserted in 1859 that the expedition would 'widen the dominions of the Anglo-

Saxon race [by] unveiling unknown portions of Australia' for settlement (McCann and Joyce 2011, p. 10). This idea was always implicit in the occupation of colonial space with 'Anglo-Saxon' bodies.

However, frontier crossings necessarily raise as many questions as they resolve about belonging and dispossession. The very act of crossing a frontier suggests recognition that the space on the other side belongs to someone else. Histories and memories of exploration cannot help but dramatise the uncertainties about belonging and territorial entitlement that have long haunted settler imaginings of the Australian landscape. Australian explorer narratives often muzzled these moral dilemmas through a powerful language of failure, victimhood and loss. Indeed, the story of Burke and Wills' failure both raised questions about the (im)possibility of complete European sovereignty over Australian space and then resolved them by making Europeans the victims of a terrifying landscape rather than invaders of another people's land.

Sadness has textured this remembrance since news reached Melbourne of the loss of Burke and Wills in 1861; the *Argus* noted that the 'narrative' of the expedition was 'now a melancholy one' (*Argus*, 4 November 1861, p. 4). When Howitt wrote about the 'melancholy duty [that] had weighed on [his] mind' once he found King, he was – no doubt unintentionally – providing further sustenance for an emotional regime that last long after he acquitted that duty. Returning to bury Wills, the party 'interred them where they lay; and ... read chap. XV of 1 Cor., that we might at least feel a melancholy satisfaction in having shown the last respect to his remains' (Howitt 1857–73, 8 September 1861). As Pinto (2010) suggested, melancholic remembrances of death on the frontier have long been a powerful mechanism through which the history of European dispossession is stripped of its more troubling emotional possibilities. Melancholy can be, after all, sweetly poignant

rather than unsettling. In psychological terms, it is given this texture by virtue of its inward orientation; it manages loss by turning towards the self rather than acknowledging the presence (let alone the loss) of an-other. Melancholic attachments are, in Freudian terms, fundamentally narcissistic (Symington 2004); they allow settler culture to focus on itself rather than on (racial and psychological) others who evoke more unsettling moral claims.

In many ways, the figure of Howitt also satisfied the narcissistic needs of Australian memory cultures. Not only did his experiences provide narrative grist for a melancholic remembrance of Burke and Wills, he also provided a satisfying alternative to their territorial alienation. Howitt's significance was ensured because his unusual competence made him look at home in, rather than threatened by, the Australian landscape. Unlike the failures of judgement, leadership and arrogance that plagued the Burke and Wills expedition, Howitt's expedition provided an imaginative counterpoint of competence and territorial comfort. Here, finally, was an explorer who seemed able to take possession of Australia, who offered a way for settler culture to belong in a space that alienated so many others.

It is important to remember that Aboriginal people were crucial participants in this history of exploration; Howitt's individual skills as a bushman do not adequately explain his success on the other side of the frontier. He was lauded as a 'master of nature's secrets' in later life (*Argus*, 25 April 1889, p. 9), but that mastery depended on his capacity to recognise that Aboriginal people were knowledgeable possessors of the land and to adopt their strategies for survival within it. However, as the century unfolded, this kind of acknowledgement became impossible for both Howitt personally and Australian culture more broadly. Howitt's tendency to forget the complexities as time passed and

the Australian nation took shape should give pause to our attempts at straightforward retrieval and inclusion.

Indeed, these histories can have quite different meanings from those ascribed by settler cultures. As Aaron Paterson, a Yandruwandha elder, remarked, the story of King has long been a part of his community's oral tradition, but in ways that might surprise. King, a hero to many settler Australians, has often been a figure of mockery in Yandruwandha memory because he seemed to spend so much of his time running around after Burke and Wills like their wife (Paterson, cited in Sexton 2008). Recent disputes over the Yandruwandha breastplates are also relevant to our comforting histories of collaboration. Scholarship suggests that, while breastplates like these were highly significant within various Aboriginal communities, their meaning was not necessarily the same to both parties (Troy 1993).

The 'discovery' and attempted sale of two breastplates in recent years revealed unresolved political faultlines over both the ownership of this past and the objects that memorialise it. The first was 'unearthed' in the sand dunes near Innamincka in 2001 and its attempted sale by its 'discoverer' prompted a public intervention by the South Australian government. The traditional custodians believed that 'all three breastplates ... were buried with the men according to customary practices' (Yandruwandha elders, *pers. comm.*), which inevitably raised questions about whether the apparent discoverer of the breastplate could legitimately claim ownership and sell it for personal profit. When the breastplate was purchased by a benefactor for the benefit of 'the nation' after a lengthy negotiation in 2008 (half the proceeds were awarded to the Yandruwandha), the South Australian premier proudly asserted that 'in many respects it is one of the earliest symbols of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia' (SA Dept of Manufacturing. 2008).<sup>2</sup>

That optimistic declaration of inclusiveness papered over the more challenging elements of Yandruwandha history, and uncomfortable but politically important questions about how it should be told.

For Gloria Paterson, another Yandruwandha elder, the breastplate was a reminder that 'whitefella culture is here now; we just gotta cope with it'. Her reading of the significance of the expedition is very compelling; King was generously sustained by the Yandruwandha but Howitt's maps allowed pastoralists to move into their territory, where the whites exhibited very little generosity in return. The history of contact that unfolded after 1861 is a story of a people battered by forceful colonisation and struggling to figure out how to cope. Gloria Paterson's grandparents told her stories about being 'chased away from important waterholes' once they were used for stock (which also spoiled them for human use). The history of brutal massacres and violence during pastoral expansion in this region during the later 19th century should temper any comfort from these earlier happier encounters, and many Yandruwandha refuse to see them as disconnected. Paterson argued that most Yandruwandha realised that their ways of being and living in the world weren't 'recognised anymore' as settler impact on the region and its people increased; for Gloria Paterson this lack of recognition, and the losses it produced, are deeply felt and mourned by the Yandruwandha 'every day'. It is little wonder that the history of Yandruwandha engagements with the breastplate seem a little ambivalent. One act of retrieval does not ameliorate a century of silence and the associated cultural and material wounds that accompanied it. The story of King and the breastplate are 'part of our history and should be respected' but the story of settler colonisation cannot be reduced to a single encounter (Paterson 2009). With this in mind, we need to acknowledge the spatial politics and

associated violences of settler colonialism, lest our hopeful accommodations into a heartening national narrative should reproduce them. This uncomfortable history is equally, if not more, worthy of the kind of recognition Paterson and her people so clearly deserve.

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## Endnotes

- 1 We might also note the ways in which such paintings distributed grief and mourning. Strutt, and many of his contemporaries, considered that the only deaths worth mourning on the settler-colonial frontier were those of the white men who perished during acts of exploration. They ignored the swathes of Indigenous peoples who were killed simply because their existence got in the way of these heroic acts.
- 2 The publicity over this first breastplate prompted two Adelaide brothers to search for for a breastplate they recalled having seen among their family's belongings; this second breastplate was found in their attic and subsequently sold at auction. Their uncle had acquired the breastplate in the 1930s, presumably from the family of the original owner, but the precise meaning and character of the exchange in the 1930s between the Yandruwandha and the collector-uncle is unclear.

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# Remembering Edwin J. Welch: surveyor to Howitt's Contingent Exploration Party

*Frank Leahy*

## Introduction

Edwin Welch, fresh from the British Navy and the Crimean War, stepped into the Burke and Wills saga in June 1861. After the fanfare of Burke's departure from Melbourne on 20 August 1860, regular reports reached the newspapers as the expedition progressed through Victoria and southern New South Wales. This ceased when Burke left the 'settled districts' at Menindee on the Darling River on 19 October 1860. Ten days later, at Torowoto Swamp, Burke instructed William Wright, the local guide he had recruited, to return to Menindee and bring to Cooper Creek the rest of the party and stores. For various reasons, Wright was slow to move and did not leave Menindee until 26 January 1861. When no more word of Burke's whereabouts had reached Melbourne by June 1861, the Royal Society of Victoria moved

to despatch what was clearly a search party, but curiously titled 'The Victorian Contingent Exploration Party' – possibly hoping the name would allay any fears that the situation could be serious. Alfred Howitt was chosen to lead a party of four, with Welch as second-in-command and surveyor.

Howitt led two expeditions associated with the Burke and Wills expedition. The first, the Victorian Contingent Exploration Party, left Melbourne in June 1861 as a search party and the second, the Victorian Exploration Party, was despatched by the Royal Society in December 1861, to recover the remains of Burke and Wills. Welch was a member of both but, due to damage to his sight, had to retire from the second before it left the settled districts on the Darling River.

Little is remembered of Welch other than him being the first member of Howitt's expedition to come upon John King, the only

survivor of Burke's party which had reached the Gulf of Carpentaria. In 2002 the National Library of Australia mounted an exhibition of an 'unprecedented array of material collected and produced' by the Burke and Wills expedition and later search parties. In the catalogue, Tim Bonyhady, the curator, remarked:

*Welch is generally remembered, if at all, for his discovery of John King – the camel hand who was the only member of the Burke and Wills expedition to cross the continent and survive. Yet Welch was also one of the most successful collectors on any expedition into the Australian interior. He not only acquired remarkable European and Aboriginal material at Cooper's Creek but a high proportion of his collection survives with invaluable documentation revealing where, when and from whom he obtained it (Bonyhady 2002, p. 1).*

Welch should be remembered for many more aspects of his association with the Burke and Wills expedition, especially his observations of the Aboriginal peoples encountered on Howitt's first expedition and his lifelong reflections on those times. He took up journalism and was distinguished by writing extensively on 19th-century Australian exploration in general and that expedition in particular. In his last years he wrote regularly, generally on exploration, for the weekly magazine *The World's News*. He completed his last article the day before his death in 1916 – it was published, along with his obituary, in that magazine two weeks later (*The World's News* 1916). Welch lived a varied life both before and after the Burke and Wills expedition but the frequency with which he retold his role as second-in-command and surveyor of Howitt's first expedition, and the episode of finding King, indicated that this was the highlight – and worth telling again.

## The finding of King

Howitt's party had set off quickly on what was likely to be a long journey in search of Burke but before reaching Swan Hill on the Murray River, they happened upon William Brahe hastening back from Cooper Creek. Brahe's disquieting news was that Burke was well overdue at the depot on Cooper Creek (Welch 1861a). Without waiting for Wright's party that was bringing extra horses, camels and stores, Burke, with Wills, King and Gray, had left the depot on 16 December 1860 to make a dash for the Gulf of Carpentaria. Brahe remained in charge of the depot with vague instructions from Burke to wait three months. Four months passed and Wright's supply party had not appeared. With members of his party sickening and stores becoming exhausted (Victoria 1861–62), Brahe decided to return to Menindee on 21 April 1861. Eight days later he chanced upon Wright's party in a critical condition – camped on the Bulloo River, desperately ill and skirmishing with a belligerent local Aboriginal community. Three members (Stone, Purcell, Becker) died in the week Brahe arrived, Patten (of Brahe's party) died six weeks later.

While waiting for the invalids to recover, Wright and Brahe made a quick dash back to the Cooper Creek depot to check if Burke had returned; they reached there on 8 May. As the plant of food appeared untouched, they left almost immediately. In fact, the cache had been opened when Burke, Wills and King (Gray having died a few days previously) struggled into the camp on the evening of 21 April 1861 – the same day Brahe had left. Welch, in reporting the rescue of King, was told that the coals of Brahe's camp fire were still glowing (Welch 1861a).

Burke, Wills and King failed in their attempt to journey the 240 km down to Mount Hopeless homestead in South Australia and had returned to Cooper Creek in a desperate condition. All camels had perished and food was exhausted – they struggled to stay alive on nardoo, the staple of the local Aborigines (see Figure 14.1). On

30 May, Wills, recognising a personal disaster was on the cards, made a second visit to the depot, opened the cache and 'Deposited some journals, and a notice of our present condition' (Wills 1863).

On learning Brahe's news, Howitt hurried back to Melbourne where he 'submitted plans to the exploration committee for a bigger and better prepared search party' (Walker 1971, p. 123). Welch took the other party members on to Swan Hill. When Howitt met up at Swan Hill, the party had grown to 10; the Aborigines, Sandy and Frank, joined at Menindee. More horses had to be purchased and significant sorting and repacking of Burke's stores left at Menindee completed before the party was ready to set out for Cooper Creek on 14 August 1861, with 37 horses and seven of Burke's camels.

In later writings Welch referred to himself as second-in-command of the Contingent Exploration Party and this was repeated in his obituary (*The World's News* 1915, 1916). It is likely that Welch was second-in-command of the original party of four members, but the expanded party included Brahe and Howitt's diaries made it clear that Brahe had become the second-in-command (Howitt 1861).

Much of the following will include quotations from Welch's diaries. At least three versions exist. What is likely to be the original is in the State Library of Victoria; it consists of notes Welch made among his daily navigational records. These were brief, mixed with 'dead reckoning' data, and appear to be have been jotted down at the conclusion of each day's travel. In



Figure 14.1: 'John King shows the blacks the remains of Burke, which they cover over with bushes'. 1861 or 1862. De Gruchy & Leigh. Lithograph. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. 30328102131801/8.

this chapter, the diary is referred to as the SLV diary (Welch 1861b). A much expanded version is stored in the Mitchell Library within the State Library of New South Wales. That version is referred to here as the Mitchell diary (Welch 1861a). It was presented to the Mitchell Library in 1918 by Welch's daughter and has a covering note:

*Diary of Edwin James Welch, of Howitt Expedition*

*Miss Welch informs me there is no doubt whatever that this is the actual original diary. Her father frequently told her how he wrote the entries in it on the pommel of his saddle and when she enquired how he preserved it from getting wet and being damaged by the weather, he said that he had it enclosed in an American leather cover: that he used no other diaries and that this actually was the original.*

This assurance of originality is easy to doubt as the diary script is so neat and in ink – difficult to achieve if written on horseback. Further, the opening sentence is:

*June Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup>. Original party composed of Mess<sup>s</sup> Howitt, Welch, Aitkin and Vining left town by the 5.45pm train, en route for Swan Hill.*

Use of the word 'original' indicates the entry was made some time after 26 June as Howitt's new party was not formed until at least a week later. Welch would have known that his navigation records and the associated notes would have to be submitted to the Exploration Committee at the conclusion of the expedition and so the Mitchell diary could well have been written as a personal memoir. It may not have been written immediately at the end of each day, but soon after, when time permitted an expansion of his first jottings.

Ernest Favenc's (1888) major work, *The History of Australian Exploration 1788–1888*, quoted a third version of Welch's diary. This version (referred to here as the Favenc diary) (Favenc 1888) is generally in close agreement

with the Mitchell diary but, as will be shown, some of the differences, although seemingly minor, are significant. Welch wrote that he was a long-time friend of Favenc and he may have supplied this version of his diary for Favenc's publication (Favenc 1888; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1908, p. 7).

Howitt's party journeyed to Cooper Creek with little difficulty. The party could be guided by Brahe who had twice traversed the entire track to Cooper Creek and the final difficult sector, four times. Welch obviously kept up a running dead-reckoning navigation but had little need for astronomic observation. This was fortunate as he had injured his eyes when making sextant observations on the sun at Swan Hill to the extent that he was finding further observations difficult. Welch (1861a) frequently mentioned that 'Burke's track' could be seen and closely followed. It is of interest, from a navigational aspect, that Welch's record makes it clear that in soft ground the tracks made by Burke's camels and horses could be clearly seen some 10 months later.

By 13 September Howitt's party was back at Burke's depot, Camp 65, on Cooper Creek. This was Brahe's second return and he again judged that the cache had not been disturbed as he saw no evidence that Burke had camped there and no markings had been added to his notice 'DIG' on the large coolibah tree (see Figure 14.2). The party quickly moved on without further investigation.

The next day, Howitt was puzzled by camel tracks going up the creek, i.e. towards the depot at Burke's Camp 65. Thoughts were raised that Burke may have returned to the depot: 'Today I noticed in two or three places old camel-droppings and tracks, where Mr. Brahe informed me he was certain their camels had never been, as they were watched every day near the depôt and tied up at night' (Howitt 1861). The Howitt party camped that night close to Burke's Camp 66 – a site known to Brahe as he had accompanied





*Figure 14.2: The DIG tree, September 1986. Philip A. Clarke, Cooper Creek 1986.*

Burke on the first day of the dash to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Tension was obviously rising within the group. In a lecture given in Bairnsdale, Victoria, in 1870, Howitt reminisces:

*This evening, many were the discussions by the camp fire about the missing explorers, and the general opinion in the party seemed to be that Burke and his companions had probably been killed by the natives before leaving the creek, or immediately on their return to it, and that the stray camel was one of theirs. I felt extremely puzzled, and certainly inclined to the belief that such a theory might prove correct. Mr. Brahe had informed me that the blacks were troublesome while he was at the depot, and that he had once been obliged to fire his revolver, over their heads to frighten them away; he also pointed out to me the native who had been the ringleader among them at that time. Ever since we had been on the creek the natives had been very excited, eternally hovering about us, and shouting 'Gow' and waving their hands. We had interpreted this, and I think not unnaturally, as a hostile sign, ordering us out of their country; but the real meaning was at that time unknown to us. Add to this the comparatively recent track of a camel going up the creek and the belief that something had happened to Burke's party might have some probability.*

*Dire were the threats of vengeance among the men should it turn out that the blacks had murdered Burke (Howitt 1870).*

Earlier in the lecture Howitt had explained that he discovered afterwards that 'the word "Gow" means goodwill, very much as we might say "All right"'.

Welch's diary shows him to be more relaxed – his excitement was to come in the morning. For this day, he was content to mention the party proceeded westward

along Cooper Creek which ran through 'a long narrow valley from 3' to 4' (3 miles to 4 miles) wide formed by Welch mountains on the north side & a range of low stony rises on the South'. Howitt had named the mountains in Welch's honour a few days earlier. In the evening, he took time for astronomy and observations for latitude and time – the latter based on his dead-reckoned longitude and made for the purpose of correcting his watch.

On 15 September, Welch was more or less riding on his own as 'he usually rode at the rear of the party finding it easier to note the variations in the course, than in the front'. Howitt and others had moved some distance from the creek looking for signs of Burke's track. Welch's story of finding King is perhaps best told in the Mitchell diary:

*At 10.20 Passed a large body of natives on the opposite side of the creek who shouted loudly at us and kept pointing further down the creek, much to our astonishment, although as we were now following the track of the small party that had left the depot for the North coast, we were eagerly looking forward to any indication of their return. Following up this sheet of water, a number of natives were observed at the other end, apparently waiting for us. Looking carelessly at the natives ahead to whom we were gradually approaching I was startled at observing what appeared to be a white man come from amongst them, although had it not been for the hat, it might still have been mistaken for an aboriginal as many of them had obtained old clothes at the Depot.*

*The hat convinced me it was a white man and giving my horse its head I dashed down the bank towards him, when he fell on his knees on the sand for a few moments in an attitude of prayer. On rising I asked him 'Who in the name of wonder are you?' and received the reply 'I am King, sir, the last man of the Exploring Expedition' (Welch 1861a, emphasis in original).*

## Howitt and Welch, two thoroughly English men take to exploration

Alfred Howitt was born in 1830 into a literary family in which both parents (William and Mary) published extensively. The family were also committed Quakers and William in particular was an exuberant, if naive, social reformer – among his causes was a petition to the government for the disestablishment of the Church of England. William was a druggist by profession but more committed to literary life. The family were well-acquainted with Wordsworth, Dickens, and Robert and Elizabeth Browning. Tennyson was a regular visitor – details were given in Howitt's biography written by his granddaughter Mary Howitt Walker (1971).

When Howitt was in his 10th year the family moved to Germany, where his schooling continued for three to four years. During that time he took up some un-Quaker-like pursuits, including dancing. Later, a letter home from Australia showed his enthusiasm lasted – he described at some length the considerable effort he put into organising a ball.

By 1852 Howitt's uncle Godfrey, William's brother, was well-established in Melbourne as a physician, botanist, entomologist and property owner. His house was at Number 1, Collins St with a frontage to Spring St and a garden extending down to Flinders Lane. The arrival of his brother and two nephews was announced in the Melbourne *Argus* and led to many visitors, including Governor La Trobe, the mayor and ex-mayor of Melbourne, the consul-general for Portugal and the chief justice.

Howitt's father William had brought him and his brother Charlton to Melbourne, attracted by the goldfields but also gathering material for publication. His books *A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia, Land, Labor and Gold; or, Two Years in Victoria*, and *Tallangetta, the Squatter's Home* appeared over the next few years (<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/howitt-godfrey-3917>).

Over the next two years William and the boys visited the goldfields, first at Beechworth and later at Bendigo. They were moderately successful in finding gold. William and Charlton returned to England in 1854 but Alfred had become committed to Australia, especially the 'bush'. His entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* includes:

*Howitt was sent in 1859 by a Melbourne syndicate to examine the pastoral potential of the Lake Eyre region on which Peter Warburton had reported rosily. He led a party with skill and speed from Adelaide through the Flinders Ranges into the Davenport Range country but found it desolated by drought and returned to warn his sponsors. His ability as a bushman and resourceful leader came to public notice when, after briefly managing a sheep station at Hamilton and prospecting in Gippsland, he took a government party through unexplored alpine country to gold strikes on the Crooked, Dargo and Wentworth Rivers. He was an obvious choice as leader when in 1861 the exploration committee of the Royal Society of Victoria decided to send an expedition to relieve or, as the worst fears sensed, to rescue Robert O'Hara Burke, William Wills, John King and Charley Gray.*

Edwin Welch was also of the English middle class, born into a family deeply entrenched in the British Royal Navy. His obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* highlighted the naval background – his father was Captain David Welch, wounded when serving on Nelson's flagship HMS *Victory* (it was unclear whether the wound occurred during the battle of Trafalgar, when Nelson died). Captain Welch later became commander of the *Victory* at Portsmouth. His older brother, Sir David Welch, was in the service of the royal family for upwards of 50 years in charge of the royal yachts (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1916, p. 9).

Edwin Welch was born in 1838 and entered what his obituary termed the 'Royal Naval School' as a cadet in 1853. This was probably the Greenwich Royal Hospital School, which in Welch's time focused upon enrolling 'the sons of officers and men of the Royal Navy and Marines'. Close to the time when Welch would have been in the school, the *Illustrated London News* (<http://www.mariners-l.co.uk/GreenwichRoyal2.html>) carried an article listing the subjects studied there, which included 'Geometry, Algebra, Navigation and Nautical Astronomy, Engineering and Steam Machinery, Chart and Mechanical Drawing'.

Welch served in the Crimean War on HMS *Himalaya*, witnessed the siege and fall of Sebastopol and was awarded three medals – the associated Royal Naval records listed him as 'Masters Assistant'. As a masters assistant or masters mate, his duties would have included assisting with the ship's navigation, using the 'Navigation and Nautical Astronomy' which he had learnt at Greenwich (<http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=NavalMedalRolls&rank>).

At the war's end, Welch left the navy and made his way to Australia and the goldfields. A remarkable number of major players associated with the Burke and Wills Expedition had experience on the Victorian goldfields: Burke as police superintendent at Castlemaine, Wills as assistant in his father's surgery in Ballarat, Howitt with his family at Beechworth and Bendigo, Neumayer and Becker at Bendigo and Brahe at the Ovens River. The *Sydney Morning Herald* obituary stated that Welch worked on the Victorian goldfields in 1858 but 'did not find it in the chunks he expected', so moved to a position at Neumayer's Magnetical Observatory in Melbourne.

Welch was acquainted with both Burke and Wills, 'and in the case of Wills intimately so as an associate in the Meteorological Observatory under Professor George Neumayer, at Flagstaff Hill, Melbourne' (Welch n.d. [c. 1910]). As Wills left with Burke in August 1860 we can assume Welch was in

Neumayer's employ at least from 1860 and possibly a year or so earlier. When Welch was recruited for Howitt's Contingent Exploration Party, the Melbourne *Argus*, extolling the worthiness of the members, described Welch as 'the surveyor, a young man who has had considerable bush experience' (*Argus*, 27 June 1861, p. 4). Considering this and the ease with which he moved into a leading role in an exploration party, it is possible that some time between the goldfields and Neumayer's observatory, Welch spent time on a sheep or cattle run. Some phrases in his expedition diaries indicated that he did have pastoral experience. Certainly naval service would not seem to be the best background for extended travel with horses and camels in the Australian outback.

Both Wills and Welch were employed at the observatory for continuous recording of meteorological and magnetic field measurements. There was also a need to reduce Neumayer's astronomical observations taken to locate the measurements made during his magnetic field surveys. As with Wills, it is likely that Welch's proficiency in positional astronomy was a factor in securing a position with Neumayer. In 1861 Welch prepared a 'Scientific Memoranda' (Welch 1861c), which reads like a textbook on positional astronomy with formulae and algorithms listed along with diagrams and example computations – possibly he needed to refresh his skills when taking up work with Neumayer.

Among the Burke and Wills material at the State Library of Victoria is a sheaf of reductions of Wills' astronomical observations taken in September 1860 as Burke's party travelled between Swan Hill and Bilbarka on the Darling River. Neumayer accompanied the party to this stage and it is assumed he brought the observations back to Melbourne. The computations are noteworthy in presentation – in Welch's clear handwriting, boldly laid out in the classical format, in ink and exuding confidence in that



there are no crossings-out or erasures. It is no surprise that Neumayer recommended to the Exploration Committee of the Royal Society that Welch would be a good choice for the post of surveyor.

## Relations with Howitt

In their old age, Welch and Howitt were on particularly comfortable terms, both recalling with some nostalgia their adventures on the Contingent Party in 1861. But at the time, their relationship was not always harmonious. The extraordinary similarity of the two diaries suggests the men sat together in the evening and reviewed the day's events before writing their journals. Welch would have reduced his navigational data beforehand and, as both diaries included Welch's estimate of the party's location, that at least must have been discussed. For example, the entry from Howitt's diary of 6 September 1861 is headed 'Friday, 6 September 1861 – Camp 24. 28'. 142° 2" while Welch concludes his entry with the navigational data given more exactly: 'Distance travelled 14 miles. Lat Camp XXIV 28° 00' S Long 142° 2'E.'

A typical event reported by both authors was the reaction of 'a party of natives' surprised by the expedition. Howitt gives the more extensive story:

*On a dry watercourse came on a party of natives, of whom [most] ran away –, the others, consisting of an old grey-haired man, an old hag of a woman, a younger man and two or three lubras and children, waited until I rode up. They were in a very excited state, waving branches and jabbering incessantly. The younger man shook all over with fright. Sandy could not understand them and I could only catch 'Gow' (go on). At last by the offer of a knife I prevailed on the old man to come with us to show us the nearest water, but after half a mile his courage gave way, and he climbed up a box-tree to be out or reach. Mr Brahé rode up to him, when he climbed into the*

*top branches, jabbering without stopping for a moment. Finding that he would not come down, and kept pointing to the N W (our course), we left him. All the natives were naked, and the old man was the only one who had any covering for his head – a net. We here entered undulating sandy country, slightly scrubby and well grassed, and at the same time on came on Brahé's down track (Howitt 1861).*

Welch's version of the meeting is:

*... we disturbed a Camp of aboriginals, who bolted immediately they saw us, but after running along the creek for some time, sat down and howled at our approach appearing very frightened. One old man we persuaded by signs, to come with us & point out water, but after going about 200 yards he took the first opportunity of getting up a tree from which he could not by any means induced to descend (Welch 1861a).*

On that first trip, tension between the two can be detected in their diary entries for the day of discovering King. Welch does not hide his excitement and the Mitchell diary version quoted earlier has all the elements of a story that would be told and retold throughout his life. Howitt seems to take pains to record that he was otherwise busy on the essential task – finding and following the 'Burke Track'. His reaction to the news that King had been found is extremely muted, despite the fact that this event was the purpose of the expedition:

*The track was visible in sandy places, and was evidently the same I had seen for the last two days. I also found horse traces in places, but very old. Crossing the creek, I cut our track and rode after the party. In doing so I came upon three pounds of tobacco, which had lain where I saw it for some time. This, together with a knife-handle, fresh horse tracks, and the camel track going eastward, puzzled me extremely, and led me into a hundred conjectures. At the lower end of the large*



*reach of water before mentioned met Sandy and Frank looking for me, with the intelligence that King, the only survivor of Mr Burke's party, had been found. A little further on I found the party halted, and immediately went across to the blacks' wurleys, where I found King sitting in a hut which the natives had made for him (Howitt 1861).*

Perhaps Howitt was displeased that Welch, on discovering a 'white man' among the Aborigines, did not immediately inform his leader and allow him to make the first formal contact. Howitt may have been uneasy about Welch keeping a diary – members of Stuart's party that were successful in reaching the north coast, were forbidden to keep diaries (Webster 1958). Some words may have been said about this; the third version of the diary, the Favenc diary (Favenc 1888), implies that Welch considers he may have not followed the accepted protocol. Welch varies the story from that in the Mitchell diary and quoted earlier, and writes that as he approached the excited Aboriginal mob:

*A feeling of something about to happen excited me somewhat, but I little expected what the sequel was to be. Moving cautiously on through the undergrowth which covered the banks of the creek, the blacks kept pace with me on the opposite side, their cries increasing in volume and intensity; when suddenly rounding a bend, I was startled at seeing a large body of them gathered on a sandy neck in the bed of the creek, between two large waterholes. Immediately they saw me, they too commenced to howl, throw their arms about, and wave their weapons in the air. I at once pulled up, and considered the propriety of waiting the arrival of the party [emphasis added].*

Welch then blames any impetuous behaviour on his horse. While in the earlier version Welch is 'giving my horse his head', in the Favenc diary his favourite horse 'Piggy' decides what action is needed:

*But here, for the first time, my favourite horse – a black cob, known in the camp as 'Piggy', a Murray Downs bred stock horse, of good local repute, both for foot and temper – appeared to think that his work was cut out for him, and the time arrived in which to do it. Pawing and snorting at the noise, he suddenly slewed round, and headed down the steep bank, through the undergrowth, straight for the crowd, as he had been wont to do after many a mob of weaners on his native plains. The blacks drew hurriedly back to the top of the opposite bank, shouting and gesticulating violently, and leaving one solitary figure, apparently covered with some scarecrow rags, and part of a hat, prominently alone in the sand. Before I could pull up, I had passed it, and as I passed it tottered, threw up its hands in the attitude of prayer, and fell on the ground. The heavy sand helped me to conquer Piggy on the level, and when I turned back, the figure had partially risen. Hastily dismounting, I was soon beside it, excitedly asking, 'Who, in the name of wonder, are you?' He answered, 'I am King, sir.' For a moment I did not grasp the thought that the object of our search was attained, for King being only one of the undistinguished members of the party, his name was unfamiliar to me. 'King?' I repeated. 'Yes,' he said; 'the last man of the exploring expedition.' 'What, Burke's?' 'Yes.' 'Where is he – and Wills?' 'Dead – both dead, long ago'; and again he fell to the ground. Then I knew who stood before me. Jumping into the saddle, I rode up the bank, fired two or three revolver shots to attract the attention of the party, and, on their coming up, sent the other black boy to cut Howitt's track and bring him back to camp (Favenc 1888).*

We could be forgiven for thinking that this third version was written some time after the events as the passage seems rehearsed and the language chosen carefully. For a

man who had served in the Royal Navy and been an assistant in Neumayer's Magnetical Observatory, it is surprising to see the phrase 'as he had been wont to do after many a mob of weaners on his native plains' when describing the behaviour of his horse – the sort of expression we would expect only if Welch had spent some time on a cattle run. Admittedly, it does lend authenticity to the story.

It is pleasing, that while the words of conversation between Welch and King vary a little, both longer versions retain King's most memorable first words, 'I am King, sir'.

In the 1870 Bairnsdale lecture, Howitt summarises the events but with the emotion we would have expected in the immediacy of his diary. As he explains in the diary, Howitt was away from the party, tracing Burke's track, when he was approached by the two Aboriginal members:

*Sandy, one of the black boys said, 'Find 'em, two fellow dead, and one fellow alive, belonging to Mr Burke.' I can scarcely tell what my feelings were at that moment; thankfulness that at least one had been saved, sorrow that the others had perished, surprise at the suddenness of the announcement, were mingled together.*

But he also says 'I believe Mr Welch, the surveyor, was the first person who had the good fortune to speak to him' (Howitt 1870), as if he is unsure or has forgotten the details of the momentous event and who had actually found King – certainly Welch was never reticent about his role. For Howitt, it indicates some residual irritation.

At Menindee and early on the second expedition there was a major falling-out. The contention arose after one of the camels, Nero, had seized the sepoy 'Battan by the elbow, lifting him up, and shook him backwards and forwards like a dog would shake a rat, for more than a minute. The arm was fearfully mangled and the expedition doctor [Murray or Wheeler] pronounced it to be a compound fracture, very much like

a machinery accident, and said that nothing but amputation could save him' (Welch 1861a).

In all the diaries associated with the Burke and Wills expedition and others, such as Howitt's, there is very little humour. Possibly Wills would qualify, with his ironic comment that his camels were 'not so nearly done up as they appeared to be' when they disappeared, leaving him and McDonough to walk back some 100 km to Burke's first depot on Cooper Creek (Murgatroyd 2002). Welch records that party members sat up with Battan at night after his injury and recounts that 'much as I feel for him I could not help laughing, when giving him a powder during my watch last night, he made a fearful grimace, & exclaimed "Oh Massa Welch, Sahib, my belly close up broke"' (Welch 1861a).

Welch approached Howitt to have the camel destroyed, 'as in addition to being old and useless, he had always shewn himself to be vicious and ill tempered, more especially latterly, having frequently hunted everybody out of the Camp, or up into trees'. Howitt initially refused then, realising all other members of the expedition agreed with Welch, said he would agree if all signed a letter recommending the animal be put down. Welch organised the letter that evening. In the morning Howitt announced the letter 'was not sufficient, and even if he got the right thing he would not sanction the act'. Welch recorded his feelings in his diary and took a shot at the Exploration Committee for good measure: 'Poor fellow, has'nt sufficient amount of moral courage just at present to incur the terrific wrath of the distinguished Exploration Committee' (Welch 1861a).

Welch felt that Howitt's outburst was directed at him and in consequence submitted a letter of resignation. The issue was patched up over 'two hours of private conversation which of course terminated with the shaking of hands and tearing up the document'. The event left Welch unsettled:

'As it is I would rather not go, for without any particular reason, I have an indescribable feeling of something, without knowing what, connected with the present trip. Time however will shew & I shall at any rate stick to it now' (Welch 1861a).

On the second Howitt expedition, the party left Menindee on Thursday 9 January 1862. In July 1861, on the first expedition, Welch had damaged his eyes while taking sextant observations on the sun and the damage had been exacerbated in September by a long series of observations taken at Howitt's Camp 32, the site where King was found. Welch could not take further observations but that was not of great consequence as the party could return on a track that was now well-known – Brahe of Burke's expedition was with the party and this was the fourth occasion that he had traversed the track.

As the second expedition moved off from Menindee, the heat and glare was intense and Welch's eye troubles returned to such an extent that Dr Murray, the expedition surgeon, and Howitt advised that he should not continue with the expedition. We cannot help thinking that, with Welch uneasy after the Battan affair, he did not protest too much.

In later life Howitt made a name for himself in the public service:

*For his services [rescuing King] Howitt was appointed police magistrate and warden of the Omeo goldfields, and in 1863 began a distinguished career of thirty-eight years as a public official, twenty-six of them as magistrate. In 1889 he became acting secretary of mines and water supply and in 1895 commissioner of audit and a member of the Public Service Board. He retired in January 1902 on a pension but served on the royal commission which in 1903 examined sites for the seat of government of the Commonwealth, and was chairman of the royal commission on the Victorian coal industry in 1905–06. (Australian Dictionary of Biography).*

After his association with the Burke and Wills Expedition, Howitt remained passionate about study and research in geology and anthropology. Although largely self-taught, his work was recognised internationally – he was appointed Fellow of both the Geological Society of London and the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain. He was much honoured in his last years, including an honorary doctorate awarded from the University of Cambridge.

Welch's later life was far more varied. After a trip back to England he joined the Queensland Electric Telegraph Department and supervised the surveying and construction of lines throughout the state. He also served in the Roads Department and supervised the construction of the bridge across the Pioneer River at Mackay. He set up a photographic business in Mackay then moved into journalism, owning newspapers in Mackay and St George in Queensland and Mansfield in Victoria. He was editor of the *Australian Photographic Review* in the late 1890s. He was appointed Secretary to the New South Wales Commissioner to the Chicago International Exposition of 1893 (<http://www.daa0.org.au/bio/edwin-j-welch/>; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1916, p. 9). As mentioned, towards the end of his life he contributed regular articles on exploration to the weekly magazine *The World's News*.

In their last years there was a comfortable relationship between Welch and Howitt, with letters exchanged between the families. On Howitt's death in 1908, Welch penned an obituary in *The World's News*:

*To all who ever came in contact with him, either in his official or private capacity, he was what the world calls 'a most lovable man', straight as a spear shaft, a hater of shams, and a stern enemy of humbug in any one of its many shapes. In all the petty and irritating trials incidental to the work of exploration, he was the friend as well as the leader of his men: and the writer is entitled to speak*

*of him as a staunch comrade as well as a genial companion from whom nothing but what was good could be learned.*

High praise ... but by mentioning 'the petty and irritating trials incidental to the work of exploration' we can surmise that Welch had not totally forgotten the incident with Battan and the camel.

In 1907, Howitt became president of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, and in his inaugural address in Adelaide spoke of exploration and his Contingent Exploration Party of 1861:

*It was Mr Welch who, riding in the lead, first saw a strange figure sitting on the bank and said, 'Who are you?' To which the reply was, 'John King, the last survivor of Burke's party. Thank God, I am saved!' I was pleased that this part of the rescue fell to Mr Welch's share, for he was a pleasant companion, a good comrade, and a man whom I was sincerely sorry to part with when I was starting on my second expedition ([http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Journals/Howitt/Howitt\\_1907.htm](http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Journals/Howitt/Howitt_1907.htm)).*

## Welch interacting with the Aboriginal community

In a chapter of the recent publication, *Burke and Wills: The Scientific Legacy of the Victorian Exploring Expedition* (Joyce and McCann 2011), anthropologist Harry Allen opened with:

*At the time the Victorian Exploring Expedition set out from Melbourne, anthropology as a discipline was in its infancy and it remained so in Australia for decades afterwards. There was little organised knowledge about Aboriginal people, with most information coming from explorers ...*

*To a great extent, the public outpouring of grief which surrounded the deaths of Burke and Wills militated against any contemporary assessment of their*

*contribution to science in general or to anthropology in particular ... this was a pity, for the observations of these explorers provide an extensive view of Aboriginal life and material culture, particularly for those Aboriginal people who lived along Cooper Creek (Allen 2011, p. 245).*

Allen followed with a thorough, and much overdue, analysis of the contacts with Aboriginal communities gleaned from the diaries and reports not only of members of the Burke and Wills expedition but also of Wright's support party and the follow-up excursions of Howitt and McKinlay. Perhaps more could be learnt from a similar analysis of the records of the search parties of Norman, Landsborough and Walker who made their way to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Although Burke's and Howitt's parties were moving through country that had been traversed previously by Sturt and Gregory, many of the local peoples would not have had prior contact with Europeans. Howitt's journeys and experiences in Victoria and South Australia made it likely that he had considerable contact with the Indigenous people, but Welch probably had not. Having arrived in Australia more recently, Welch would be more representative of the mid 19th-century English establishment's reaction to a sudden confrontation with a totally foreign, and in their eyes primitive, society. The diaries of Welch and Howitt flesh out Allen's analysis, recording that the party continually sought information from the Aboriginal people and that in turn the Aboriginal community was very interested in what the intruders were up to. The descriptions, particularly the language used, allow us to form an impression of the explorers' predisposition to what they viewed as a backward population.

The commentary in Welch's diary as the party left the settled districts at Menindee shows that the availability of water was paramount, particularly as the group was travelling with 37 horses and seven camels

(Welch 1861a). The one item of information continually sought from the Aborigines was the location of water holes. The entries in Welch's diary for August are typical:

*Saturday August 17<sup>th</sup> ... According to the Blacks this water is permanent and has every appearance of being so ...*

*Monday August 19<sup>th</sup> ... saw the first Warrigle Blackfellows one of whom ran after us talking and gesticulating considerably but when spoken to could give no intelligent information ...*

*Tuesday August 20<sup>th</sup> ... At 9 35 crossed the same creek again, running N&S up to a gorge running up to the ranges in the E<sup>d</sup> where according to the account of a Warrigle blackfellow who came up to us, there is plenty of good & permanent water.*

*Friday August 23<sup>rd</sup> ... we found a blacks camp, recently left, with fires alight, & boomerangs, waddies, nets &c hung up in the branches of some scrub, the owners having most probably bolted with fright at our approach.*

*Saturday August 31<sup>st</sup> ... Between 1 & 2 pm met a camp of Warrigle Blacks; who showed us water at some distance off the track to the Westward in a small Clay Pan which they call Kinlijm ...*

Generally, apart from the initial fright of the Aborigines when startled by the approaching explorers, the meetings were peaceful. An exception recorded by Welch is:

*Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> September ... we found a large body of natives, one of whom who [sic] was dabbed with clay, skeleton fashion, came near gesticulating violently, motioning us away ...*

But things returned to normal later in the day:

... followed by 15 or 20 natives, some of whom by the way were fine strapping fellows and wore a belt of net round their loins ...

Welch is one of the few exploration diarists who identifies the tribe of natives

met – either as Wonominta or Warrigle Blacks. He is also unique in recording the characteristics of particular Aborigines in situations other than belligerent confrontation as reported by McKinlay and Wright (McKinlay 1863; Wright 1862). Of one of the Aborigines met at Menindee, Welch writes:

*Albert, the Wonominta Black boy an extraordinary character, not understanding a word of English, grins when spoken to, displays his white teeth, and ejaculates 'Wonominta'.*

## Welch's comments on King's rescuers and trading

In one sense, the real rescuers of King were the Yandruwandha tribe living over an area in the vicinity of present-day Innamincka. Before leaving the site of King's discovery, Howitt wanted to distribute gifts as a reward for caring for King. The tribe were camped some 6 km along the creek and Howitt, having some trouble in convincing them to come to his camp, visited their camp and 'giving them a few trifles persuaded them they should come up to the Camp, and they should all have presents'. King informed Welch that their reluctance could be that 'they were afraid they would have to supply us with Nardoo & Fish as they had done for him'. Welch commented, 'as there are 12 of us their shyness is scarcely to be wondered at'. The passage in Welch's diary, describing the distribution of gifts, is quoted in full as it reveals as much about his beliefs as the behaviour of the Aborigines:

*Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> September. Shortly after breakfast this morning the whole tribe of blacks made their appearance numbering between 20 & 30. As a body they are a most emaciated, hungry, looking crew,\* but more especially the women, one of which in particular was the exact facsimile of a baboon. All appeared in a perfect state of nudity as they exist. The generality of the men are circumcised,*



*in addition to loss of front teeth, and some few of these wear a girdle of grass net round the loins. Their only weapon, at least as far as we have seen, is the Boomerang, which tho very rudely cut, is still effective at short distances, & certainly a great exhibition of patience, when one considers they have no tools but a sharp flint to construct them with. After making them sit down we distributed a large selection of trifles amongst them which we had brought with us to meet any such an emergency.*

*These consisted of Tomahawks, Knives, Looking Glasses, Beads, Handkerchiefs, Coloured Ribbon &c &c, with all of which they appeared highly delighted, more particularly with the Cutlery and Looking Glasses. In addition to these we gave them a 50lb bag of flour, explaining it was 'White fellow's Nardoo' and a small Bag of Sugar which they like very much.*

*They returned to their Camp, apparently in a state of great excitement, yabbering loudly, and continually repeating 'Whitefellow', 'Whitefellow', the only word they are as yet acquainted with. From my slight knowledge of these people I should say, that a little kind treatment, would render them subservient & then services a very valuable addition in many respects, to any white man coming amongst them. They are highly superstitious & may therefore be easily wrought upon either for good or evil. Their great failing, appears to be a disposition to theft, one very simply counteracted; but the kindness of the natives, will I think after the foregoing narrative be scarcely called in question.*

*They certainly have too great fear of white men ever to seek a quarrel, but will doubtless in the event of them finding themselves the strongest party, appear rather bouncible [sic] (colonial). Their courage is however doubtful and their very wholesome dread of firearms leads*

*them to conclude, from one shot over their heads, that Discretion is the better part of Valour.*

*\*This applies only to this particular Camp or Tribe – as the Coopers Creek Blacks generally are a far superior lot to those on the Border Rivers.*

A week later, the party had travelled some 60 km along the creek on their journey back to Menindee. Welch records the build-up to a trading session that made him 'one of the most successful collectors on any expedition into the Australian interior ... he not only acquired remarkable European and Aboriginal material at Cooper's Creek but a high proportion of his collection survives' (Bonyhady 2002, p. 1). The collection was a centrepiece of the Australian National Library's 2002 exhibition.

Howitt's camp was on a large water hole:

*... near a very large camp of blacks, the male portion of which however were out fishing. On taking a stroll up the creek with the Gun, I unconsciously surprised two of the ladies bathing, who at first appeared rather frightened, without being in the least bashful, & soon recovering their equanimity, invited me to come and join them.*

*We also passed a large camp on the side of the Creek while travelling today, members of whom came to us with Nardoo Cakes and Pitcheri, and an invitation to their Camp, which however, circumstances prevented our accepting. I got a nardoo cake from one of them and gave him in return a strip of my pocket handkerchief, which pleased him exceedingly, I think on account of the colour, it being red silk ... these same people had run from us on our approach, when going down the Creek, but one of the tribe King had lived with, was now with them, and his representations of our gifts &c at Camp XXXII, had doubtless wrought this wondrous change (Welch 1861a).*

It is surprising that Howitt met a member of the tribe with whom King had lived, six days and 60 km away from where King was found. We can only conclude that, for a local, movement over that distance in that time period would seem to be nothing out of the ordinary.

That evening, the men from the nearby camp approached Howitt's party and on being given the last of the 'knives and looking glasses':

*... became very friendly, and one or two of 'the party', imbued with the spirit of trade, soon started them trading their nets, boomerangs &c for old rags or matches. For an old pair of Trowsers [sic] I obtained one man's wardrobe complete, consisting of a girdle of grass rope and a grass net for confining the hair; unfortunately nothing of the sort could be obtained from the Ladies, as they roam around in the perfect state of 'Nature', untrammelled by either girdles or nets. Just after dusk we startled & amused them greatly by sending up rockets and burning blue lights, had they not seen us stand so close to them, they would doubtless have run off into the scrub (Welch 1861a).*

The Aborigines returned a number of times during the night, and at daylight wanted to trade more:

*I had the greatest possible fun with some of them shewing my watch, the tick of which they could not make out, but the finishing stroke was by touching the spring & letting the case fly open, this frightened them so much they got up and ran away, and did not return until I left the spot. When the horses were brought up, they shifted further away, ejaculating 'Yaramandy, Yaramandy' and would not come near us (Welch 1861a).*

## Reaction to the report of King killing Burke

Howitt's party was back at Menindee by 28 October and spent a week packing and

sorting the considerable remnants of Burke's stores. On 5 November, Welch, with Phillips as assistant, was given the task of taking King back to Melbourne. The Darling River was in flood and, as King could not swim, he 'was securely attached to the long switch tail of a quiet pony, was led into the water and practically towed across with Welch swimming on one side and Phillips the other' (Welch n.d. [c. 1910]). The three men arrived in Melbourne on 25 November. In later writings Welch often remarked that he got to know King well during the journeys from Cooper Creek to Menindee, and from Menindee to Melbourne, and questioned him closely about living with the Aborigines on Cooper Creek. Welch became a great defender of King; when a newspaper reported a story of King killing Burke, Welch quickly defended the late King. (For a fuller discussion of how Burke died, see Ch. 9.)

The unattributed article in *The Queenslander* (1 May 1875, p. 7) reported a person travelling along Cooper Creek, in the vicinity of Innamincka and Howitt's second excursion depot. Howitt's and, supposedly, Gregory's marked trees were sighted. Welch objected to the passage:

*An old gin I spoke to recollected the explorers, and helped cover Burke's body with bushes after his death. She also affirmed Burke had not died from starvation but had been shot by 'nother one white fellow' ... she persisted in saying she had actually seen a white fellow – who answers in every way the description of King – come behind Burke when he was stooping at the fire roasting a duck, and shoot him in the side ... King, after his return to Melbourne, told the Expedition Committee that there was some secret in connection with the expedition, that he would not divulge while living ... It was then generally supposed that King's secret was connected with Gray's death on return journey from Carpentaria, and who was said to have been so ill-used by Burke so as to cause*

*his death. Wills, however, fully exonerated his chief from this imputation, but it was notorious that both King and Gray had not very kindly feelings towards Burke.*

Welch was known as a writer who was straightforward, 'a strong and caustic pen' who 'naturally made enemies as well as friends'. This can be believed – in a letter to the editor of *The Queenslander* (8 May 1875, p. 7), he began with 'I am quite sure that those who are acquainted [with] the melancholy history of the Burke and Wills expedition will treat this published fable with the contempt it merits.'

Welch focused on the last sentence Burke scribbled as he was close to death – 'King has behaved nobly' – and the fact that the note was 'written in the presence of and handed for safe keeping to the man now accused of murdering him!' And King had no motive for murder:

*The murder of one dying man for another, for what? So far as it being notorious 'that both King and Gray had not very kindly feelings towards Burke', the records of the past will show that in every case where Burke's judgement, decisions or actions were called in question during the progress of the subsequent enquiry, King was his earnest defender and advocate; and, from the day he was first found on Cooper's Creek he was thoroughly enthusiastic and consistent on this point.*

Most interesting is Welch's comment about 'some secret in connection with the expedition'. He does not dispute there is a secret, but declares that this is the 'first I have heard that the existence of such secret having been made public'. He revealed that he knew of an event, associated with the expedition, that King wished to keep to himself; Welch's knowledge of it 'was purely accidental'. King's return to Victoria was chaotic, particularly in the gold-mining towns of Bendigo and Castlemaine:

*He was received as a hero, and deservedly so, but in a state of health,*

*body and mental, not all suited to the reception of the startling amount of worship prepared for him en route. He was in a pitiably weak condition and fainted on several occasions due to over excitement ... at Bendigo, whilst in a state of great weakness and nervous excitement caused in that town and neighbourhood, he inadvertently made a remark, the meaning of which I asked him some hours later when partially recovered. His excitement returned, and with great difficulty he confided to me a statement under a solemn promise of absolute silence unless afterwards requested by him to repeat it. The importance of this communication appeared to me at the time very trifling and I believe must have worn the same aspect for himself when he recovered himself and spirits at a later period.*

Welch's letter finishes with some highly passionate but legally careful words – some of which Welch would probably have liked to have said to King. And one suspects the phrase 'My promise to King has been kept' was one he would have liked on his own epitaph:

*I solemnly assert that this so called secret had no reference whatever to crime or guilt of any kind. That its publication could not then, or any time since, have been attended with any good results. That its suppression was desirable for many good reasons, and did not in the slightest degree affect the verdict of the public on the subject of Victorian exploration, or the name, fame, or reputation of anyone connected therewith. My promise to King has been kept, and will be unless something very extraordinary should render the opposite course necessary, in which case there would be great disappointment for those who expect anything sensational.*

For those who are familiar with the diaries and transcript of the Commission of Inquiry, Welch's view is commonsensical and the fact

that he was so closely involved must add weight to his view. Like Welch, the author of this chapter believes that the idea that King murdered Burke is fanciful. And again like Welch, this author doubts that Burke's disciplining of Gray, although ill-advised in the circumstances, contributed to his death in any real way.

What remains is the nature of King's secret. To this author, it was unrelated to the death of Gray – King was very vocal about that, both in his testimony before the Commission of Inquiry and, astoundingly, in what may have been his first reported public statement on his return to Victoria. Welch says that at Bendigo, King was in a 'pitiably weak condition and fainted on several occasions due to over excitement' and could not at all handle the crowds' adulation. Stories must have circulated about Burke's alleged role in the death of Gray and King steeled himself against his weakness, to say just one sentence – 'Burke did not thrash Gray!' The full *Argus* transcript read:

*Messrs. Welch and Phillips, of Howitt's contingent, arrived at three o'clock this evening, in charge of Mr. King. They were met at the boundary of the municipality by the chairman, and members of the municipal council, and escorted to the Shamrock Hotel, where they were received and entertained by a huge number of the most influential citizens. Mr. King appeared on the balcony, and after also on the stage of the Theatre Royal, and received a perfect ovation. Mr. King, who is rather weak, will remain here till Monday morning. He states that Burke did not thrash Gray (25 November 1861, p. 4 [emphasis added]).*

The author of this chapter believes that King's secret is more likely to be related to his experiences living with the Aboriginal community and the possibility of him having a daughter, born after he left Cooper Creek – an event that, if revealed, would not have sat well with the heroisms ascribed to the expedition by Victorian Melbourne.

Murgatroyd (2002, p. 361) wrote that common knowledge around Innamincka and belief among descendants of John King's family involved King's Aboriginal family:

*... with a story now acknowledged by senior members of the Yandruwandha. In 1867a drover named James Arnold, also known as 'Narran Jim', was riding through the Cooper area. He came across a little half caste girl around five or six years old who was living with the Aboriginal people. She was nicknamed 'Yellow Alice' and 'Miss King'. The Yandruwandha alive today believe she was John King's daughter.*

John Conrick, born at Portarlington in Victoria in 1852, followed the Burke and Wills track and established Nappa Merrie Station in 1871, in an area which included the DIG tree and Camp 65. In the early 1990s the author of this chapter questioned his grandson, also a John Conrick, about his knowledge of 'Yellow Alice'. He said that she was employed by his grandmother as a housemaid in the early days at Nappa Merrie and, in time, 'went walkabout and died young'.

## Conclusion

Edwin Welch's record of the meeting of Howitt's Contingent Exploration Party and the Aboriginal communities of the Cooper Creek in 1861 contrasts with those of earlier explorations by Europeans. Despite Howitt's warning that 'Dire were the threats of vengeance among the men should it turn out that the blacks had murdered Burke', the meetings were harmonious and without the violence associated with McKinlay's excursion, the skirmishing of Wright's party or the distrust and confrontational attitude displayed by Burke. The circumstances, of course, were different. Howitt's party was moving quickly and not utilising valuable resources for extended periods. The one extended camp of 10 days was at the site of King's rescue, an occasion celebrated by both communities and obviously intended to be of

short duration. The succour provided by the tribe to King engendered a great deal of trust on both sides.

Welch could claim some credit. His comment 'that a little kind treatment, would render them subservient & ... a very valuable addition in many respects, to any white man coming amongst them' reveals him to be an expatriate Englishman in a colony of his time. But his better side is evidenced by his obvious delight in the frivolity associated with the trading sessions and the recognition of the long-term value of the goods collected – in Bonyhady's words, 'one of the most successful collectors on any expedition into the Australian interior'. And perhaps mention should be made of his continual use, in contrast to other diarists, of the term 'the ladies' when referring to the women of the tribes.

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# **‘We have received news from the blacks’: Aboriginal messengers and their reports of the Burke relief expedition (1861–62) led by John McKinlay**

*Fred Cahir*

One of the tasks often given to Aboriginal people on the Australian frontier was that of messenger. Prior to the construction of a trans-Australia telegram communications network in the 1870s, news from the ‘unsettled’<sup>1</sup> districts was often conveyed by Aboriginal messengers. The first part of this chapter will examine characteristic features of Aboriginal communications and the Aboriginal role of messenger in Australian exploration history. The second part is a study of Aboriginal messengers, in particular their importance for the 1861 South Australian rescue expedition led by John McKinlay which was despatched from Adelaide to find the missing members of the Burke and Wills expedition (see Figure 15.1). The chapter also analyses the news relayed by Aboriginal messengers about the McKinlay expedition to the colonial press. In tracing the history of this story and its variants, we

not only get an insight into the important function these news carriers performed, but also the mechanisms by which Aboriginal news of the frontier (i.e. frontier news important to Aboriginal people) was interpreted by newspapers eager for news about the Burke and Wills expedition and the exploratory relief parties in 1861–62.

Explorer accounts of intra-Aboriginal communications and intercultural communications – between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – were frequently commented upon. For example, A.W. Howitt (1904, p. 720) observed when travelling through the Lake Eyre district in 1859 that he daily saw Dieri smoke signals which were to alert expected visitors about the position of their camp and to ‘call the attention of other parties of Yandairunga to the strangers [Howitt’s party] travelling in their country’. Likewise, Major Mitchell (1838, p. 241),



*Figure 15.1:* John McKinlay, 1862. Batchelder & O'Neill photograph. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H37475/31.

during his exploratory journeys of south-eastern Australia, observed that ‘the natives have an easy method of telegraphing news to their distant friends’. Mitchell often saw columns of smoke ascending through the trees in the forests, and soon learnt that Aboriginal people used the smoke to make known their movements to their friends. Near Mount Frazer in Queensland he observed a dense column of smoke; other smokes subsequently arose, extending in a telegraphic line far to the south along the base of the mountains and thus communicating to neighbouring Aboriginal people, who might be upon Mitchell’s route homewards, the tidings of his return. Mitchell discovered that this form of bush communication was used for intercultural purposes as well. At Portland Bay in Victoria, which Mitchell reached in 1836, he noticed that at the sight of a whale in the bay the local Aboriginal clans were accustomed to send up a column of smoke, thus giving timely intimation to all the non-Indigenous whalers. If the whale were pursued by one boat’s crew only, it might be taken; but if pursued by several, it would probably be run ashore and become food for the Aborigines.

Other explorers also observed rapid Aboriginal communications about the movements of white people. Jardine *et al.* (1867, p. 85), writing about the Aboriginal people of Cape York, remarked that:

*... communication between the islanders and the natives of the mainland is frequent; and the rapid manner in which news is carried from tribe to tribe to great distances is astonishing. I was informed of the approach of H.M.S. Salamander on her last visit two days before her arrival here. Intelligence is conveyed by means of fires made to throw smoke up in different forms, and by messengers who perform long and rapid journeys.*

Ethnographers such as R.B. Smyth (1878, vol. 2, p. 602) noted how Aboriginal ‘telegraphy’ was used with devastating effect

against white people. Smyth explained how Aboriginal people:

*... exhibited great ability in managing their system of telegraphy; and in former times it was not seldom used to the injury of the white settlers, who, at first, had no idea that the thin column of smoke rising through the foliage of the adjacent bush, and raised perhaps by some feeble old woman, was an intimation to the warriors to advance and attack the Europeans.*

An instance of messengers being used to forewarn the colonists was recorded by William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines and later Guardian of Aborigines. Thomas (cited in Smyth 1878, vol 1, p. 133) recalled how Aboriginal people tried in vain to use their messengers to warn Melbourne residents of impending doom:

*A sorcerer, celebrated as a man possessing great power, a very old black, and a member of the same tribe as that to which Mun-nie Brum-brum belonged, was a prisoner in the Melbourne gaol many years ago. He had committed some depredations on the flocks of the settlers. The news of his arrest was carried to near and far-off tribes – to tribes more than 200 miles from Melbourne. The men were greatly distressed. Telegraph fires were lighted, and night after night these could be seen in all directions. Messengers from seven tribes were sent to my blacks. My blacks importuned me day after day to liberate the black stranger. Finding that I would not liberate him, they urged me and all the settlers with whom they were friendly to leave the district and go to Van Diemen’s Land or Sydney.*

The role of Aboriginal messengers has been the subject of much discussion by many anthropologists and writers, particularly in the 19th century when their role was of great significance to fledgling colonies. Influential publications on Aboriginal ethnology such as Smyth’s (1878) often devoted large sections to the subject of messengers. Smyth drew

heavily upon the correspondence of long-term residents across Australia to provide intricate details of Aboriginal customs and beliefs. He observed that messengers had an ambassadorial role:

*On very solemn occasions two ambassadors or messengers are appointed; ordinarily, only one. The messenger has to carry a token, by virtue of which he passes safely through the lands of the several tribes, The token is a piece of wood, eight or ten inches in length, sometimes round and sometimes flat, and seldom more than one inch in thickness. On it are inscribed hieroglyphics which can be read and interpreted, and which notify all persons of the nature of the mission (1878, vol. 2, p. 134).*

Howitt (1904, p. 678) devoted an entire chapter to the subject of messengers and message sticks. He explained that the role of ceremonial messengers was highly ritualised and highly regarded in Aboriginal society prior to colonisation:

*In all tribes there are certain men who are, so to say, free of one or more of the adjacent tribes. This arises out of tribal intermarriage; and, indeed, marriages are sometimes arranged for what may be termed 'state reasons', that is, in order that there may be means of sending ceremonial communications by some one who can enter and traverse a perhaps unfriendly country, with safety to himself and with security for the delivery of his message. In some cases these ceremonial messengers, as will be seen later on, are women. But the bearing of merely friendly messages within the tribe is usually by a relative of the sender. The message itself is, in other tribes, conveyed by what the whites in certain districts call a 'blackfellow's letter' – a message-stick. There has been much misunderstanding, not to say misstatement, as to the real character of these message-sticks, and the conventional value of the markings*

*on them. It has been said that they can be read and understood by the person to whom they are sent without the marks on them.*

Long-time colonists on the Lower Murray River such as Peter Beveridge (1861) confirmed that the role of sacred and ceremonial messengers was equivalent to that of postman: the 'Aboriginal people on the Lower Murray had one or two men in each tribe, who were termed *gualla nattom* (messengers or postmen), whose persons were sacred.' Beveridge observed that the messengers could travel among other tribes with freedom. Their function was not just to pass knowledge from one group to another but to conduct all negotiations connected with barter. Other commentators (Smyth, 1878, vol. 1, pp. 133–134) also stressed the sacredness – the inviolability of the messenger, and the message itself.

## Aboriginal messengers on the frontier

Aboriginal messengers, unlike trackers, have not entered the 21st-century cinematic or socio-cultural consciousness. While Aboriginal trackers have attracted attention in non-Indigenous history books, literature and films (thanks in large part to Rolf de Heer's (2002) *The Tracker*, Patrick Hughes' (2010) *Red Hill* and Phillip Noyce's (2002) *Rabbit Proof Fence*) Aboriginal messengers have been marginalised. Probyn (2005) asserted that the tracker is a multi-faceted enigma that has been closely scrutinised and Cahir (2010) noted that Aboriginal guides have attracted some discussion about their pre-eminence in the exploratory era of Australian history (e.g. Short 2009; Clarke 2008; Reynolds (2000), but Aboriginal messengers have not been accorded the importance attached to them in the 19th century by explorers. This is unexpected, given that the expertise of Aboriginal messengers was quickly capitalised upon by white colonisers on the fringes of the



frontier. Foster (1998, p. 105) stated that the 'utilisation of Aborigines as message carriers for Europeans developed very early on the Australian frontier and was an extension of the Aboriginal role as guide'.

It is interesting to note that studies of Aboriginal people's conceptualisation of work on the frontier (Broome 1994; Pope 1988; McGrath 1987; Cahir 2001) and before colonisation (Berndt and Berndt 1999) affirmed that work (whether for white people or for ceremonial purposes) reflected the deepest meanings of life and one's place in it – work was always religiously and personally significant and sanctioned by custom. Aboriginal people often chose to work for white people, especially in the capacity of messenger 'for the novelty – not from hunger – and probably to establish a closer, reciprocal relationship' with the colonists who had taken up residence on their ancestral lands (Broome 1994). An anthropologist, Baldwin Spencer (1928, p. 546), stated that there was a great similarity between the role they assumed of news carrier for the whites 'to the traditional role of messengers'. Over time the Aboriginal role of message carrier for white people assumed more formal, even ritual qualities and it became customary for the message to be carried in the end of a cleft stick. Howitt (1904, p. 688) stated that there were 'official' heralds who could travel safely between adjoining tribes and, because they were well-known, they had no need to 'carry any badge or emblem of office'. However, if employed as a white man's messenger the paper was 'fastened in the end of a split stick'. Carrying this before him, he might pass safely through an enemy's country because he was seen to be the white man's messenger; if any harm were done to him, the tribe of the white man would be very angry.

Foster (1998, p. 106) noted how Howitt employed the technique in his own dealings with Aborigines. Returning to Adelaide from the Cooper Creek region in the 1860s, with the Burke and Wills rescue expedition, Howitt

sent ahead a messenger with news which the colonial press was eagerly awaiting:

*To ensure his good treatment by any white man he might meet on his way through the settlements, I wrote a sort of passport which I folded up and put into the end of a stick. I explained to him what it was, and when he sorrowfully started on his long journey he carried the stick perpendicularly in his hand in front of himself, as a sort of talisman which would ensure safety (Howitt 1904, p. 688).*

As Howitt explained, the stick in which the paper yabber was carried served as a visible symbol of neutrality to members of other tribal groups that the messenger might encounter on his travels.

In the colonial period, white people who had had 'long experience with the blacks' (Foster 1998, pp. 107–108) often placed overt emphasis on their honesty and correctness in reporting oral news. This prominence is of interest in light of how Aboriginal messengers were used extensively by colonial newspapers to bring news (both written memos and oral messages) from the frontier to their readers. Smyth's (1878, vol. 1, p. 133) chapter on Aboriginal messengers included:

*However unpleasant the tidings may be, the persons of the messengers are held sacred, and they are always patiently heard and hospitably treated ... The blacks usually chose for messengers and to send on expeditions such men as they could trust, and men who could talk well. Whatever report they brought back was generally believed.*

*Mr. Green, of Coranderrk (Yarra Yarra River), informs me that, for bringing a false report from another tribe to his own tribe, a man was for the first offence will be beaten with the waddy; for the second speared in the thigh; and for the third he might be killed.*

*The Rev. F. A. Hagenauer writes thus:  
–The Aborigines punished in their wild*

*state all deception and lying by open fight. If children did it, their parents had to stand and fight for it. The blacks always gave quite correct reports of their expeditions, and do so to the present day.'*

The validity of the information, or the 'genuineness of the message' being conveyed by the messenger and their medium is still contested (Thomas 2004, p. 10). A biographical study of the anthropologist R.H. Mathews (1897), who wrote at length on the subject of messengers and message sticks, appealed for a greater appreciation of the similarity between Aboriginal messengers and message sticks and ethnographers and books or pamphlets:

*The direct exchange between pamphlets and message sticks suggests a certain equivalence between these items. Yet the two categories of object have been treated very differently in ethnographic discourse and display ... Is there anything in Mathews' description of a message stick that could not be said of one of his own booklets? It too communicates through the inscription of 'marks' or 'notches' on a surface. It too travels along trade routes. And like the message stick, the ethnographic text provides evidence (too often uncritically accepted) of the 'genuineness of the message' (Thomas 2004, p. 10).*

## McKinlay and messengers

In 1861 the South Australian government decided to send an expedition to the relief of the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition. It was known as the South Australian Burke Relief Expedition and given the acronym SABRE. John McKinlay had already acquired a reputation as an experienced bushman. According to Favenc (1908, p. 275), McKinlay first came to the colony of New South Wales in 1836 and joined his uncle, a prosperous grazier, 'under whose guidance he soon became a good bushman with an ardent love of bush life. He took up several runs near

the South Australian border, and thenceforth became associated with that province.' Formative attitudes towards Aboriginal people are visible in a letter to his mother in June 1839: 'In parts of the colony the Blacks still continue their Barbarism ... they have been and continue to be always molesting and injuring the whites' (McKinlay 1839, cited in Lockwood 1995, p. xxi). In the early 1850s McKinlay took Barkindji land and his attitude towards Aboriginal people and land tenure hardened further. He was reputed to have written that the Barkindji 'were committing frightful murders and destroying their flocks and herds to an alarming extent. The blacks in fact took possession of the country, threatening to utterly exterminate the white man, and establish a perfect reign of terror' (Lockwood 1995, p. xxiii). However extreme McKinlay's outlook on Aboriginal people, it was tempered by his need for their knowledge. His attitude towards Aboriginal people was utilitarian, and throughout his life he was willing to utilise Aboriginal expertise where required. There were also several episodes which clearly altered McKinlay's Eurocentric perception about the nature of Aboriginal people (Lockwood 1995, p. 16). It is unlikely that, when appointed to lead SABRE, an instruction to 'engage the services of two aboriginal natives, as trackers' (Lockwood, 1995, p. 5) would have troubled McKinlay. The expedition started from Adelaide on 14 August 1861 for Blanchewater with 10 men, 22 horses, four camels, 12 bullocks, 100 sheep, one dog and a light cart.

Many biographical accounts of John McKinlay have been published (Loyau 1880; Whyte 1881; Browne 1993; Davis 1863; Lockwood 1995; Gibson 2012; Favenc 1908; Harlow 1992) but still none which deal comprehensively with McKinlay's knowledge of and use of Aboriginal messengers. On the one hand this is hardly surprising, given that the preface to McKinlay's *Diary of his Journey across the Continent of Australia* (1863, p. i) erroneously asserted that McKinlay was 'Unaccompanied by

any aborigines'. In fact he employed three Aboriginal men at Blanchewater and enlisted many others during the journey. McKinlay started his journey with 'Peter and Sambo ... also Jack, the native shepherd'. When those three left the expedition he 'Started with the camels and Mr Middleton and a native named Bulingani [from the Lake Hope region], provisions and water, to go to the relief of the whites said to be In the Interior' (McKinlay 1863, pp. 1–2).

Remarkably, the anonymous writer of the preface disowned any Aboriginal assistance to the McKinlay expedition for the entire journey from Adelaide to Queensland, avowing that he 'trusted solely to his own skill as a bushman'. We could be forgiven for assuming that McKinlay placed little value on Aboriginal messengers or guides; at the commencement of his diary he provided a very guarded appraisal of the veracity of news he had received from Aboriginal people about a party of whites (presumably Burke and Wills) trapped in the Australian interior:

*A few days before arriving at said station [Blanchewater], I was informed that the natives had brought in a report of some white men and camels being seen at some inland water by them, or rather others of Pando or Lake Hope tribe, but did not give the report much credit knowing how easy a person may be misled from the statement he hears from natives, and the probability of putting a wrong construction upon what he hears, more particularly from a tribe of people who really do not understand what you say to them, having hardly any English, but intend making every inquiry and, if at all satisfactory on the point, will make a push for their relief (McKinlay 1863, p. 1).*

In a letter to the South Australian premier, McKinlay (cited in Lockwood 1995, p. 10) explained that the reason why he thought the story not genuine was based on local Aboriginal intelligence: 'So far as I can make out from the natives on the spot, I think it only an idle rumour'.

Although the writer of the preface in McKinlay's published diary attempted to excise the integral role of Aboriginal messengers/guides, McKinlay himself made extensive references to his use of Aboriginal messengers and the vital role they played. There is further evidence that McKinlay used and trusted Aboriginal messengers, in an undated oral history anecdote (presumably pre-SABRE):

*An Aboriginal named Kato was given a letter by McKinlay to take to a place on Lake Victoria. The letter was taken from Kato by a shepherd, who opened it and read it. McKinlay flogged the shepherd, and finally found Kato and said: 'Now, you scoundrel, tell me to whom you gave that letter, or I will punch your old head off.' Kato jumped into the river from a 20ft bank and halfway across called 'now, Mr McKinlay, I'm bin gabber along you, I bin losem that letter, and white man bin find em, me plenty frightened and run away' (Kerridge family, cited in Lockwood 1995, p. xxiv).*

### *The function of Aboriginal messengers on the McKinlay expedition*

McKinlay's party left Blanchewater Station, the northernmost outpost of white occupation at that time, then traversed Lake Torrens and, striking north, crossed the lower end of Cooper Creek at a point where the main watercourse is lost in a maze of channels. There he learnt from Aboriginal messengers definite and particular details respecting the rumoured white men, and became 'anxious to get to the place reported by the natives as the abode of the white man, or men' (McKinlay 1863, p. 2). Having formed a depot camp, he went ahead with two white men and Bulingani, an Aboriginal messenger who 'knew something of white men'. It was not surprising that McKinlay would take immediate action on the 'say-so' of Aboriginal messengers: 'Considering the minute and circumstantial accounts that have from time to time been related by the

blacks concerning Leichhardt, one is not astonished at the legends told to McKinlay ... so that McKinlay was led to place some credence in this story' (Favenc 1908, p. 294).

In his diary McKinlay made constant references to employing local Aboriginal messengers, as well as Bulingani. His use of local guides and messengers was evidenced by his extensive recordings of very specific local place-names – McKinlay, like many explorers before him, utilised local Aboriginal place-name knowledge. So often did he elicit and record Aboriginal place-names that it is difficult to follow his route without a map and the journal containing the record of his travel during the first weeks: 'Not only does he give the native name of every small lakelet and waterhole in full, but he omits to give the bearing of his daily course' (Favenc 1908, p. 204). McKinlay was acutely aware, as they progressed further north, that their messengers or guides might be killed by local clans because they did not have customary permission to be on country that was foreign to them. The shortcomings of employing Aboriginal messengers such as Bulingani who was not able to converse in the local languages became clear to McKinlay, and at various times he commented on the palpable fear which Bulingani expressed. Another member of the expedition was also aware of the fear Aboriginal people had of being outside their country:

*I also had to keep a sharp eye on a native friend who had come with us a short way to prevent his bolting, as our long tried companion, Mr Nilmily, vanished immediately on our arrival here, and has not been seen since; he got the funks on the march I fancy, as he was getting out of his latitude ... he has been really useful to the party (Davis 1863, p. 243).*

Because of these factors, explorers such as McKinlay employed both local and external Aboriginal messengers for various positions. These included the important function of mediating peaceful relations in an environment where the whites were

numerically inferior and decidedly uneasy about being in Aboriginal country:

*Friday, October 11 – Camped surrounded by [200 of] them on all sides ... We kept watch and during the night, sending the native [Bullingani] who was with us to camp with the blacks, who gave us some fish (McKinlay 1863, p. 2).*

At times McKinlay was frustrated by the paucity of information he was able to glean from Aboriginal messengers. In one instance he lamented that he was unable to elicit information about the whereabouts of Burke and Wills party: 'They give no particular Intelligence as to the camel save mimicking their awkward way of travelling, with their heads thrown back' (McKinlay 1863, p. 7). There were also occasions when he needed to receive and send messages from his advance position at Cooper Creek back to supply camps. On one occasion McKinlay enlisted three Aboriginal women to act as messengers, as he considered there was a better chance that the message would get through swiftly:

*Friday October 18 – Saw some of the natives on the way here, and sent Mr Hodgkinson and Bulingani back for one of them to forward a letter to Camp Depot, to desire them to move on to this place – so much more desirable for a depot than where they are now. In the meantime three lubras [vernacular for Aboriginal women] arrived on the opposite side of the lake, and we called them over ... started the lubras back to the cart with a note requesting them [other members of the expedition] to advance to this lake (McKinlay 1863, p. 7).*

*Saturday November 29 – two natives arrived on opposite side of lake, bringing the joyous tidings that the party under charge of Mr Hodgkinson had camped at a creek called Keradinil, about eight miles from this last night, so that I can expect them every hour. I was heartily glad to hear of them (McKinlay 1863, p. 3).*

On other occasions McKinlay sought to obtain information from Aboriginal messengers and guides about the condition of the track ahead (p. 7), how to obtain reliable water (p. 7), the occurrence of rain (p. 14), the direction of creek flows (p. 14), 'the names of the different waters and places' (p. 15) and the fate of some white people, whom McKinlay believed to be Burke and Wills (p. 7):

*Some natives visited the camp during my absence ... I sent for one to endeavour to get some information from the messenger ... I mean to take him out east if he stops the night.*

*From a long conversation I had with a native yesterday, who came to the camp, I am led to believe that only one of the whites were murdered at lake Cadhibaerri, [Kadhiberri] at the time of the attack upon them ... So minutely does this native know all their movements, that he has described to me all the waters they passed.*

On 18 October 1861 McKinlay left two men at the Lake Buchanan (Lake Coogicooginna) depot and took his second-in-command Hodgkinson, Middleton and Bulingani to Lake Kadhiberri. They came to a watercourse where they found signs of a grave, and picked up obvious white artefacts such as a battered pint-pot. Next morning, seeing that the ground had been disturbed by a spade, they opened what proved to be a grave and in it found the body of a European, the skull marked, so McKinlay stated, with two sabre cuts. He thought the body was that of Charley Gray, a member of Burke and Will's party. McKinlay found the remains of another partially empty grave and surmised that the entire Burke and Wills expedition had been killed there, so he called the place Lake Massacre. When they returned on 2 December, McKinlay took two men and two Aboriginal guides to the Cooper to see if Howitt had arrived. They arrived at the Cooper on 6 December

and found Burke's grave, Wills' grave and Howitt's abandoned camp, so returned to Lake Perigundi. Aboriginal messengers had informed Bulingani of what had taken place, and he then relayed information to Hodgkinson (*South Australian Advertiser*, 23 November 1861, p. 2) about the events that had allegedly occurred at the lake:

*I have, however, forgotten that during the day Bulingani had taken an opportunity when we were riding apart to tell both Mr McKinlay and myself that there was but one whitefellow and one horse; that the latter had been killed by the former for food, and that lastly the white man had been slain by the natives with one of the wooden swords I have described. This tale was repeated with an appearance of the most profound grief, ending with a request that we would go back to Mullndhuroona, and shoot the perpetrators of the massacre (*Hodgkinson in South Australian Advertiser*, 23 November 1861, p. 2).*

The next day McKinlay's party interrogated Keri Keri, an Aboriginal man, about the graves and discovered that he had scars which implicated him in the events at the lake (see Figure 15.2):

*On being questioned as to the whitefellows, he led us to an adjacent sandhill, and without hesitation commenced scratching on a spot from which he brought to view a quantity of burnt horsehair, used for the stuffing of saddles. He was then taken to our camp, fed, and more closely examined. A wound on his knee attracting our attention, he showed how he had been shot, by pointing to my gun, and carried from the spot on another native's back. Besides the wound on his knee, there was another bullet-mark on his chest, re-issuing between the shoulders, and four buckshot still protruding from the centre of his back. He corroborated all Bulingani had said relative to the massacre and its cannibalistic denouement,*



*distinctly stated that four whites were killed (Hodgkinson in South Australian Advertiser, 23 November 1861, p. 2).*

A great deal of mystery still surrounds this discovery. The identity of the whites who had bloody altercations with the Aboriginal people in the region remains unknown, and an alternative version of the events was offered by 'one old native with whom he had a long conversation' (McKinlay 1863, p. 7). McKinlay believed there was some truth in the alternative version.

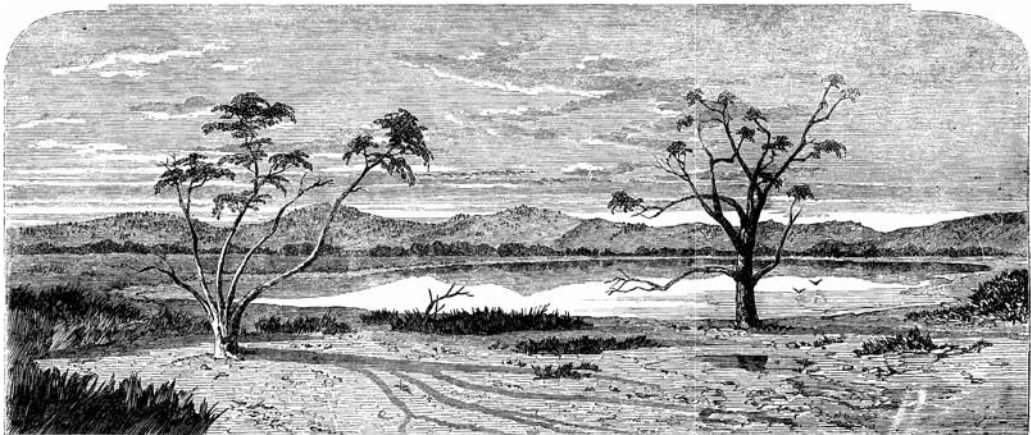
The second version was to the effect that the whites had been attacked by Aboriginal warriors, but had repulsed them. One white man had been killed and was buried, and the other whites went south. McKinlay was told that the Aborigines had dug up the body and eaten the flesh. The old Aborigine also described minutely 'the different waters passed by Burke, and the way in which the men subsisted on the seeds of the nardoo plant, all of which he must have heard from other natives' (cited in Favenc 1908, p. 203).

However, there are many instances where McKinlay did not trust information from Aboriginal messengers. On 24 January 1862 McKinlay, in dire need of water, noted: 'Natives are with me, but they declare it [a lake to the north of the party] to be all dry: but I cannot rely on their statements at

all times.' Several days later he was again dubious about the veracity of Aboriginal messengers who conveyed more bad news, this time about an impending flood: 'Ariimitha was coming down, and that we must get out of this or we should be drowned' (McKinlay 1863, p. 13). Although he was very sceptical about a flood in the middle of a very dry summer, McKinlay's long and beneficial associations with Aboriginal messengers 'made it his business to ascertain the truth or otherwise of this information'. The prediction of flooding came to pass; McKinlay and his party were surrounded by a 'perfect sea rising fast'.

### Aboriginal news of McKinlay in the news

Writing about Aboriginal testimony and colonial forms of commemoration, Nugent (2006, p. 33) argued that the evidence for historical events – such as Captain Cook's arrival at Botany Bay – by the colonial press and by 'historians, writers, politicians, remembrancers and others' was often authenticated by Aboriginal eyewitnesses. Analysis of the steady stream of newspaper reports about the Burke and Wills expedition and the McKinlay rescue expedition (1861–62) revealed a similar trend. A vivid example is a story that for several months



KADHI BIERI, OR MASSACRE LAKE.

Figure 15.2: 'Kadhi Bieri, or Massacre Lake'. R.P. Leitch. *Illustrated London News*, 1 March 1862. National Library of Australia, Rex Nan Kivell Collection.

was headlined in colonial newspapers across Australia. A letter which emanated directly from Aboriginal messengers prompted McKinlay to change his route to investigate rumours revolving around a 'fabulous story'. Aboriginal messengers had advised that members of the Burke and Wills party were living on a raft at Cooper Creek. This was an intensely attractive story for the colonial press that could be authenticated only by Aboriginal messengers:

*Wirrilpa, September 12<sup>th</sup> 1861.*

*Sir – I have the honour to forward the following particulars gathered from the blacks, seeming to refer to Mr Burke and party. A black fellow called Sambo, who has lately come in from Lake Hope, brought with him the hair of two white men, which he showed to the cook and stockmen at Tooncatchim; he says it was given to him by other blacks, who told him that there were white men living further out than where he had been. Frank James, one of Mr Butler's stockmen, saw Sambo again on the 6<sup>th</sup> instant and tried to get the hair from him; he had unfortunately given it away to other blacks. James promised him tobacco for it, and he has promised to get it again. Sambo says the white men are naked; have no firearms or horses, but animals from which his description are evidently camels; that they sleep on a raft which they built on the water; they live on fish which they catch with nets made with grass. Sambo says the other blacks told him that the white men arrived there this winter. According to Sambo these people are 20 sleeps from Tooncatchim, by way of Lake Hope Creek ... so it is possible that they all are on or near Coopers Creek. Sambo is quite willing to go out all the way with a party of white men. He also says the blacks on Lake Hope Ck. are afraid of these white men.*

*James Howe, P.S*

(*'Mr Burke's Party'*, South Australian Advertiser, 20 September 1861, p. 4).

News from Aboriginal people has been used to authenticate and to 'provide the "other" side of the story of an historical event, to settle a controversy over the interpretation of the past in the present, or to make a critical point about the value or otherwise of Aboriginal knowledge in Australian history or memory' Nugent (2006, p. 33). At times Aboriginal knowledge of explorers far in the interior was reported by the colonial press as a matter of fact. A report in the *South Australia Advertiser* (23 June 1862, p. 4) about an encounter between Stuart's expedition and local clans in central Australia was clearly sourced from Aboriginal messengers:

*News from the far north: a letter received by Mr James Chambers from Mr Steven Jarvis and dated Mt Margaret May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1862, was on the 30<sup>th</sup> Ult forwarded to the Hon. Commissioner of Crown Lands. We gleaned from the despatch that on April 22<sup>nd</sup> a black fellow came to the station at Mt Margaret stating that he was sent by old man Jamie, the king of the tribe, to tell Mr Jarvis that: 'the wild blacks had taken flour; that the white fella with all about nanto had been loose 'im, and no flour set down now.' He also stated that the blacks threw the flour on the ground and 'man him pelter' that they had the wurley-pelter, meaning a tent which Stuart put up on the flat there; and that the blacks had cut it to pieces with a stone, so that 'all about black fellow pelter him'.*

*He was also informed that there was a 'nanto' (horse) at one of the springs where they get water. By pelter the blacks mean anything which they put on themselves. On receiving this information Mr Jarvis, thinking it advisable to test the truth of the statements, went out on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April l... it is thought that no fears need be excited by this information, as it is supposed that the tent was deserted when found to be too cumbersome; and also that the nanto is only a stray packhorse*

(South Australia Advertiser, 23 June 1862, p. 4).

More news of inland explorers – this time McKinlay's party – was conveyed to readers in the same edition, attributed directly to Aborigines and with other Aboriginal sources seemingly substantiating its authenticity:

*The natives at Lake Hope say that Mr McKinlay is a long way to the north, and that the floods from the North East have surrounded him, and he will be obliged to stay where he is until the waters subside. This report agrees with that given by the Coopers Creek natives* (South Australia Advertiser, 23 June 1862, p. 4).

Rival newspapers, not to be outdone, also utilised Aboriginal news to report on exploration parties. The *South Australian Register* (20 June 1862, p. 2) reported 'With regard to McKinlay's expedition, rumours were prevalent amongst the natives that the whole party were camped to the West of Lake Hope, all well, and preparing for a final start upon their explorations to the North and North West.'

The European receptiveness to Aboriginal news as truthful and precise can be traced in large part to racial notions held by Europeans of Aboriginal societies. The widely read journals of exploration by Mitchell (1838), Eyre (1845) and Grey (1841) all spoke glowingly of Aboriginal fidelity and highlighted this aspect of their nature as proof of their 'humanness, regardless of the unfamiliar natural and social conditions in which they lived' (Strong 1986, p. 183).

However, Aboriginal eyewitness trace-accounts were sometimes used duplicitously in the colonial press. Accounts by Aboriginal people of explorers' whereabouts or movements were sometimes discredited if not vouched for or corroborated by whites. A report in the *South Australian Register* (25 April 1862, p. 2) is a representative example:

*Mr Finlay's Party – Mr Goyder, Surveyor-General, who has just returned from the Far North, states that he saw Mr*

*Weatherstone, of the Finnis Springs, who informed him that the blacks reported that Mr McKinlay had passed over from Cooper's Creek to the north of Lake Eyre. Of course, this information, coming solely from the natives, cannot be vouched for. But it is probably correct, as one of the chief objects of McKinlay's exploration was to proceed in the direction indicated.*

At times, Aboriginal accounts of events were downplayed as little more than 'children of nature' gossip that bore no resemblance to truth. Concerns in the colonial press about the fate of explorers often focused on the 'treachery of natives' – there were persistent Aboriginal news reports that McKinlay's party had been murdered by Aborigines:

*Mr Goyder has brought later news into town of Mr McKinlay and his party. The intelligence, however, is derived primarily from the blacks, so that it must be taken for what it is worth. It appears that somewhere in the vicinity of Angipens, Mr Goyder met Mr Weatherstone, who had come down from his run in the Far North for letters and despatches, and Mr Weatherstone stated that the blacks informed him of 'whitefellow with nanto and amu-nanto' [horses and camels], at a point considerably north of Lake Eyre. Mr McKinlay must therefore have struck out this route from Cooper's Creek, and if so he has crossed a country never before traversed by white men. The whole party are represented as being in good health. It is of course uncertain from these scanty details to pronounce with certainty what Mr McKinlay has been doing, or intends to do, but unless he should make up his mind to push across the continent, a supposition by no means ridiculous, we may expect to hear from him in two or three weeks' time* (South Australian Advertiser, 24 April 1862, p. 3).

Interestingly, there is also some indication in Aboriginal news reports (*South Australian Advertiser*, 4 April 1862, p. 2) that explorers' movements were knowingly

manipulated by Aborigines. This may be evidence of Aboriginal agency in terms of how they wished events to be chronicled. It is unclear why Aborigines would report extravagantly that whites were murdered by other Aboriginal people; possibly it was to demonise other Aboriginal peoples with whom the sources were at enmity.<sup>2</sup>

*We have been favoured by the Commissioner of Crown Lands with the following copy of a letter just received from Corporal Wauhop who is in the far north, and which pretty well sets at rest any apprehensions which may have been felt respecting the rumour of Mr McKinlay's party having been murdered by the blacks.*

*'Police station, Mt Searle, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1862*

*'Sir – I have the honour to report for your information that I have just returned from Blanche Town and Tooncatchin, outstations of Mr Bakers, accompanied by police trooper Poynter [Aboriginal trooper] and made every inquiry respecting the reported murder of Mr McKinlay and party, and cannot hear anything to substantiate the report of Owandine, Billy, and Pompey, who now contradict their former statements by saying they were only "Monkey Yabber" (meaning that it's untrue).*

*I have seen several other natives, and from enquiries made of them they say that the natives are too much frightened of Mr McKinlay to come in contact with him again. The settlers living about there also disbelieve the report ... Mr Howitt states that the natives on the creek are on friendly terms with himself and party and has no reason to suppose that anything has happened to Mr McKinlay and party, and it is his intention to make enquiries on his return (South Australian Advertiser, 26 April 1862, p. 5).*

It is feasible that the misreporting or 'monkey yabber' was merely a form of

'gammoning' or joking with white people. Aboriginal peoples were (and still are) well-known for their predilection for poking fun at greenhorns (inexperienced white people) in the bush. Stanner (1982, p. 43) and Cahir (2001, 2006) pointed to an established tradition of 'venomous endearments' directed towards themselves and white people and their customs.

However, Aboriginal-derived reports of McKinlay and his party being massacred continued to appear in the newspapers. Some examples are provided below:

*The natives who gave rise to the rumours we have referred to are known to be untrustworthy, and their story is not believed by the police in the north. Mr McKinlay, too, is one of the last men to be surprised by natives. A more wary and experienced bushman never had charge of an expedition ('McKinlay's Expedition', Sydney Morning Herald, 29 March 1862, p. 8).*

*Mr Walter Jacka has just arrived in Adelaide from the far North, and has furnished us with the following information; he states that the blacks had reported to the overseer of Jacob's outside station that their party (supposed to be McKinlay's) had all died, or tumbled down as they say in their vernacular; and that the horses or 'nantos' and the camels or 'long back nantos carry piccaninni hills' had all shared a similar fate. Our informant also adds that the natives were, when he left, mustering very strong, and becoming somewhat troublesome. 700, it was reported, were going down to Chambers Station scouring the country on their way ('The Far North', South Australian Register, 26 March 1862, p. 5).*

*Police Station Mount Serle, Feb. 20, 1862. From the northern patrol, I have the honour to lay before you the following information, received by him from Edward Glood, stockkeeper at Petemara,*



*one of Mr Jacob's stations, viz., that he had seen two Hill natives named Owandina Billy and Pompey, who told him that they were on the plains in the direction of Lake Hope, and had seen some of the natives of that place, who told them that the Saltwater blacks had killed Mr McKinlay and party, and had eaten all the sheep and bullocks. The Euro Nantoes, they said, ran away – meaning the camels.*

*'Police trooper Besley states that he made it his business to see the native who returned from Mr McKinlay's party about five weeks since, also a number of Lake Hope blacks, at Tooncatchim (an out station of John Baker's Esq.), and made every enquiry of them respecting Mr McKinlay and party, but none of them appeared to know any thing of the above rumour.*

*'Police trooper Besley made every endeavour to see the two Hill blacks who gave rise to the above report, but was unable to do so.*

*'It is my impression that the statement of the two blacks, Pompey and Billy is without foundation and I should have considered it unworthy of your notice, but thinking it might reach Adelaide from other parties [sic]*

*'I have, &c., James Wauchop, Corporal ('Reported Murder of Mr McKinlay's Party', South Australian Register, 26 March 1862, p. 4).*

The dependability of Aboriginal news about explorers' whereabouts was critical to many explorers' survival as relief parties might only be despatched on the basis of Aboriginal messenger information. Many explorers' accounts reported their dependence on the veracity of Aboriginal knowledge, but it was also often misunderstood. A report in the *South Australian Advertiser* (23 November 1862, p. 4) revealed the press' swift pandering

to fears of murder and cannibalism by Aborigines – and the lack of investigation into the historical veracity or cultural context<sup>3</sup> of such reports:

*Mr McKinlay however, did more than discover the remains of Europeans. He collected indubitable proof that these Europeans had been massacred. The natives of the district confessed to the murder of the party, and acknowledged that they had feasted on the remains of their victims. Nor had this tragical result been attained without a struggle.*

Biber (2005, p. 623) noted that 'the discourse of cannibalism is a repeated and powerful trope in colonial contact and conflict. Fascination with and accusations of anthropology, ritual sacrifice and survival cannibalism disclose the fear of the native "Other"'.

Reports of McKinlay's party (*South Australian Register*, 22 November 1861, p. 5) firing upon and massacring an unidentified number of Aboriginal people (verified by McKinlay and Hodgkinson) were also included in the newspapers. McKinlay wrote that he tried to use an Aboriginal messenger to avert the need to fire upon a large group of Aboriginal warriors: 'I immediately ordered them back, also telling the native that was with me [Bulangani] to tell them that if they did not keep back I would fire upon them, which they one and all disregarded.'

It is noteworthy that the accolades bestowed upon McKinlay after his expedition included praise that not one of his men had perished during the arduous journey; the South Australian government ignored McKinlay's acknowledged order to fire upon a group of Aboriginal people.

## Conclusion

This study of the role of Aboriginal messengers on the Australian exploratory frontier conducted through the gaze of the South Australian Burke Relief Expedition, led by John McKinlay, reiterated the extent



to which Aboriginal messengers were relied upon to accomplish the mission and enable safe travel through Australia from south to north, the second exploration party to achieve that. Analysis of the news relayed by Aboriginal messengers about the McKinlay expedition to the colonial press revealed the crucial function of these news carriers in relaying the only available information about exploratory parties deep in the interior, to the wider community. It has also been possible to view the mechanisms and motives by which Aboriginal news of McKinlay's party – news important to Aboriginal people and newspaper editors alike – was interpreted and manipulated by both messengers for their own purposes.

## Endnotes

- 1 The term 'unsettled districts' was used by successive colonial governments in 19th-century Australia to describe a district which had not been surveyed or gazetted as a district.
- 2 See Berndt and Berndt (1999) for a discussion about intertribal attitudes.
- 3 Berndt and Berndt (1999) noted that within certain contexts, namely as part of funerary rites, ritual cannibalism did occur in some groups. Smyth (1878, vol. 1, pp 120–121) cited Samuel Gason: 'the author of the little work on the manners of the Dieyerie [Dieri] people gives the following description of the modes of disposing of the dead. It appears that the fat of the corpse is eaten: When a man, woman, or child dies, no matter from what cause, the big toes of each foot are tied together, and the body enveloped in a net. The grave is dug to about three feet ... a native proceeds to cut off all the fat adhering to the muscles of the face, thighs, arms, and stomach, and passes it round to be swallowed; the reason assigned for this horrible practice being that thus the nearest relatives may forget the departed and not be continually crying.' For further information also see Goldman (1999).

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# William Landsborough's expedition of 1862 from Carpentaria to Victoria in search of Burke and Wills: exploration with native police troopers and Aboriginal guides

*Peta Jeffries*

## Introduction

The fate of Burke and Wills is well-known in Australian history, but less has been written about the several relief expeditions and little about the Aboriginal people involved with the journeys. This chapter examines the influence and agency of Aboriginal guides and explorers during 19th-century colonial Australia. It focuses on the ways in which stories of place influenced relationships between Landsborough's rescue expeditionary party (Figure 16.1) and Aboriginal peoples in the Barcoo and Cooper Creek regions. These intercultural encounters will be highlighted alongside examples of 'cultural blindness' (Plumwood 2003, p. 60), followed by discussion and analysis of the separate cultures' mutual adaptation to find a sense of continuity and belonging in a rapidly changing world. The

chapter will show that Jemmy, Fisherman and Jackey, the Aboriginal people involved with Landsborough's expedition, not only guided the non-Aboriginal explorers through country, they also fed and watered them. They were vital contributors to the experiences that became stories of colonial exploration and settlement.

William Landsborough (1825–86) grew up in Scotland and in 1841 migrated to New South Wales, where his elder brothers held two stations. In 1861, Landsborough was recommended by A.C. Gregory and chosen by the Victorian and Queensland governments to lead a search for Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills from the Gulf of Carpentaria southwards towards Victoria (Trundle 1974). The fate of Burke and Wills was unknown at the time.

Landsborough's was one of four expeditions sent to search for the missing



Burke and Wills. The first was formed in Melbourne, with the Royal Society of Victoria appointing Alfred William Howitt to lead the Victorian Relief Expedition. The second was formed in Adelaide, and led by John McKinlay. The Exploration Committee of the Royal Society of Victoria appointed Frederick Walker to lead a third party of 12 men from Rockhampton along the Barcoo and Thomson rivers to the Norman River, then to the Gulf of Carpentaria to meet Commander Norman and H.C.M.S. steamship *Victoria*. The main focus of this chapter is Landsborough's expedition, the fourth relief party. The party left Brisbane on the *Firefly*, escorted by the steamship *Victoria* despatched by the Victorian government, sent to the Gulf of Carpentaria to assist Walker and Landsborough from the Albert River (Burketown). The Landsborough expedition party successfully travelled all the way from the Gulf of Carpentaria to Victoria.

## Stories of place

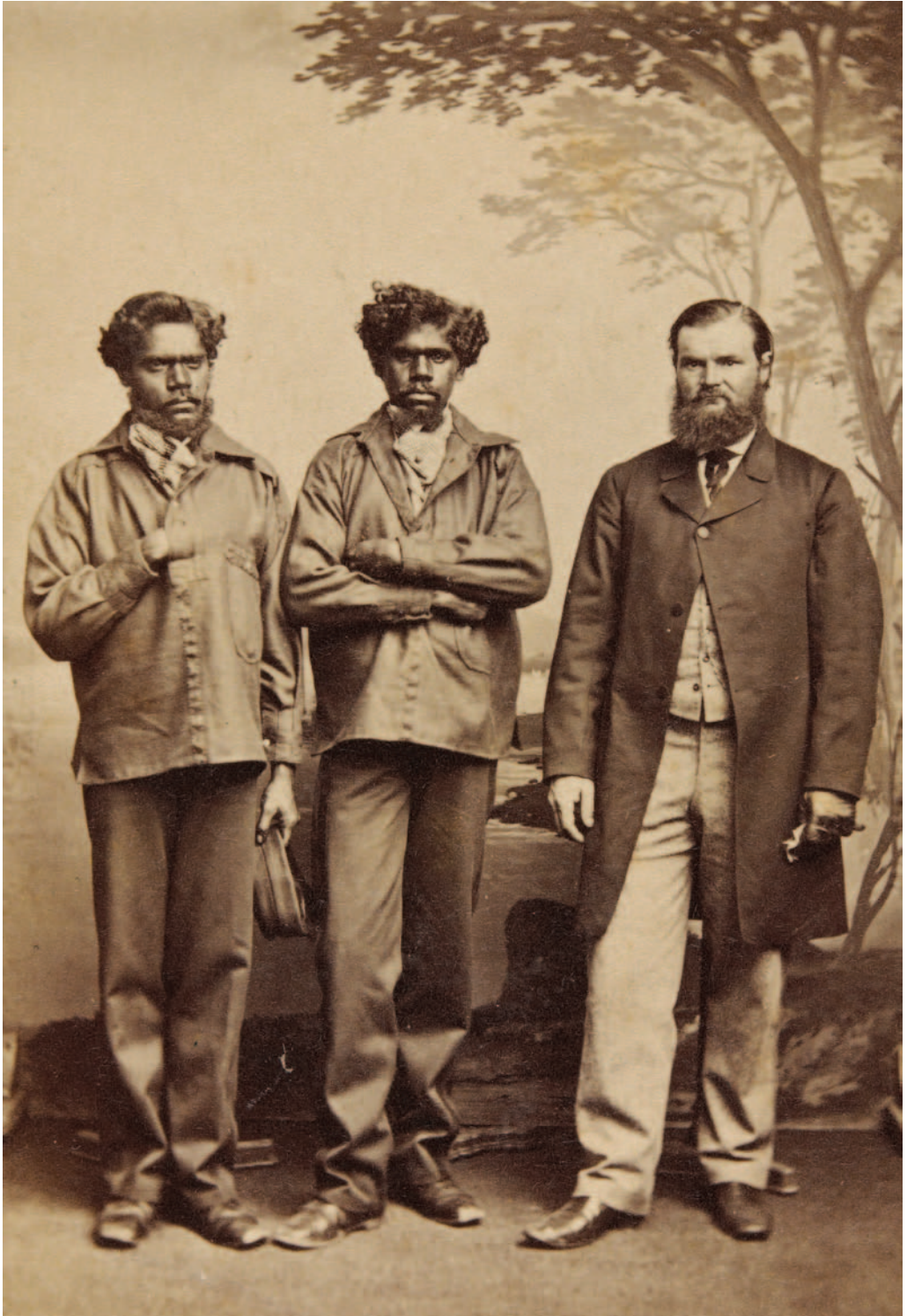
Landsborough's journal recorded events and experiences that occurred between 4 February and 21 May 1862, from the Albert River to the Warrego River. This chapter will follow this linear storyline, through a place-based (Rose 2000) analysis of the country through which they travelled. Following Relph's (1992, p. 37) definition, 'the word "place" is best applied to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are implicated and enfolded by each other' (Cameron 2003, p. 173). Earlier stories of specific place can add meaning and significance to expedition accounts of the places through which they travelled. This will draw out the ways in which Landsborough and other members of the party were influenced by these earlier stories, and reveal how these stories of past events remained 'in place', shaping explorers' relationships to the environment and people they encountered.

The main 'place' of focus is named the Barcoo River (Barcoo is an Aboriginal word) and the interconnecting water systems including the Thomson River and Cooper Creek. The main part of this story is situated within the rectangular geographical locations between what is today known as Longreach on the Thomson River, Barcaldine on the Alice River (which feeds into the Barcoo River) to the Warrego River further south and then west to Cooper Creek. We will also mention the surrounding areas, due to the great distances travelled and the relevance of the experiences that shaped the events.

In 1862 the centre of Australia was unknown to people in settled districts; following the Burke and Wills expedition, it has been commonly termed 'the ghostly blank' (Moorehead 1963, p. 1). It was simply imagined by settlers who dreamed of vast pastures, gold or maybe an inland sea. As Moorehead (1963, p. 1) wrote in *Cooper's Creek*: 'here perhaps, more than anywhere, humanity had had a chance to make a fresh start. The land was absolutely untouched and unknown'.

One defining term in the explorers' accounts is 'wilderness' (Landsborough 1963, p. 59). It suggested that Australia was 'nature untouched', which denied Aboriginal ecological agency. This concept of wilderness 'plays a key role in colonization because it justifies a system of appropriation based upon the way the lands of others are represented as pure nature, as *terra nullius*' (Plumwood 2003, p. 75). The denial of Aboriginal presence and involvement in the colonial exploration of Australia maintained ideas of wilderness, of untouched 'pure' nature, in which the term *terra nullius* sometimes operated to the detriment of the explorers.

The idea that Australia was wilderness or pure nature was insensitive to the long-standing connection of Aboriginal people to country. This chapter, while considering the arguments around the use of terms that supported colonial occupation, such



*Figure 16.1:* William Landsborough with two Aboriginal explorers, Jemmy and Jack Fisherman. c. 1862. Batchelder & O'Neill, photograph. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection. Accession no. H29452.

as *terra nullius* (Langton 1996; Reynolds 2006a), mentions the centric dynamic of us–them polarisation by ‘acknowledging and reclaiming continuity and overlap between the polarized groups, as well as internal diversity within them’ (Plumwood 2003, p. 60). Countering the dynamic, ‘denial, assimilation and instrumentalization’, of the colonial centric structure requires ‘recognition of the Other’s difference, independence and agency’. Centrism is (it would be nice to say ‘was’) ‘a framework of moral and cultural blindness’ (Plumwood 2003, p. 60). Many of the published recollections of the Burke and Wills saga revealed moral and cultural blindness, which is why it is beneficial to use primary sources (and oral traditions) to find evidence of overlap between these traditionally polarised groups, and evidence or traces of moral and cultural seeing.

The expedition journals do reveal traces of moral and cultural seeing and recognition of vital Aboriginal involvement during settlement. This is revealed not just in the various forms of generous hospitality shown to the explorers (for example, that of the Yandruwandha people towards Burke, Wills and King) but in the attempts of individuals to find ways of being in country together, of mutual adaptation. Most of all, this chapter reveals the importance of Aboriginal knowledge, without which the newcomers may have perished in the unfamiliar environment.

## Jemmy, the ‘Queensland Mounted Police Trooper’ from Deniliquin

The Landsborough expedition party consisted of six men: William Landsborough, commander; George Bourne, second-in-command; W. Gleeson (or Leeson: Bourne 1862, p. 26), groom, cook and former sailor; Jemmy, Queensland Native Mounted Police trooper, originally from Deniliquin; Fisherman, Aboriginal guide from the

Brisbane region; and Jackey, Aboriginal guide from the Wide Bay district. There were 20 or 21 horses (Bourne 1862, p. 26).

Jemmy’s life experiences prior to this expedition were important: he had been taken to Brisbane and placed in the police force after his mother and father had been shot by ‘whites’ (Bourne 1862, p. 26). It is difficult to understand what happened to Jemmy and his family, but this tragedy was not an isolated event. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* (12 December 1861, p. 5), an unknown author wrote about the abduction of Aboriginal children from the Queensland river regions, assumed to be between the Nagoa River and Barcoo River regions, and another case where a small Aboriginal child was told that his parents had been shot. The article disclosed ‘a new phase of aboriginal treatment’ in the 19th century and raised many questions, especially in relation to Jemmy, the native police force and its recruitment practices. Jonathan Richards in *The Secret War: A True History of Queensland’s Native Police* stated that ‘Native Police troopers in the northern districts of New South Wales (present-day Queensland) were all recruited in the southern colonies before 1860, and until about 1870 many of the troopers came from Victoria and New South Wales’ (Richards 2008, p. 122).

Was Jemmy a willing recruit or was he misled by the authorities, taken far from home and told that his family was dead? These questions are difficult to answer, and raise more questions about relations between Aboriginal people and the colonisers. Richards (2008, p. 125) held that ‘the issue of Aboriginal collaboration with the colonizers, and the implications of this for frontier violence, are important topics that need further careful research’. This chapter will discuss collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and look at violence that occurred on the Landsborough expedition.

## Historical traces of reliance on Aboriginal guides during exploration and colonisation

Three significant historical documents upon which we will draw are the *Journal of Landsborough's Expedition from Carpentaria, in Search of Burke and Wills* (Landsborough 1963), an *Extract of Despatch from Mr. Landsborough to the Hon. the COLONIAL SECRETARY, Queensland, dated Bunnawaunah, Darling River, June 1st, 1862* (Landsborough 1862) and *Bourne's Journal of Landsborough's Expedition from Carpentaria in Search of Burke and Wills* (Bourne 1862). These reveal the contrasting intentions of the Landsborough expedition: (in no order of preference) the intention to search for and find Burke and Wills, and the intention to colonise.

There is no denying that the expedition members experienced life-altering events, which would have moved them from one phase of emotional and intellectual processing towards another. The life-and-death situations created mutual dependency. For example, in a letter to the Royal Society of Victoria (2 June 1862), Landsborough (1963, p. 102) stated that the lives of his expedition party depended on the 'vigilance' of the watchmen, in this case Jemmy the Aboriginal police trooper. He also recorded that an Aboriginal guide, Jackey, 'shot about a half-a-dozen of whistling ducks and a large grey crane' which made 'great quantities' of 'fresh food' (Landsborough 1963, p. 6). We 'had also as many nice little figs as we like to eat from a large shady clump of bushes near the camp' (Landsborough 1963, p. 22). These examples reveal that the Aboriginal members protected the lives of the whole party by offering 'vigilance', 'great quantities' of 'fresh food' and even 'shady' campsites. Although the expedition traversed a large area, from the Gulf country where 'figs' grew and further south to more arid regions where food and water resources were limited, this discussion focuses on one particular 'place' – the Barcoo River.

Landsborough (1862) documented the events that transpired on the Barcoo River, in the letter informing the Royal Society of Victoria of his party's safe arrival at Bunnawaunah on the Darling River, New South Wales. Describing the state of the country, he wrote that the 'road we came was so easy, from the richness of the pasturage and the abundance of water, that a foal, named Flinders from his having been foaled on the Flinders River, followed his mother most bravely from the time he was a few hours old until he reached here' (Landsborough 1862, p. 40). Further, the:

*route from the Gulf of Carpentaria, Mr Gregory's route to South Australia (down the Barcoo River and the Cooper Creek into South Australia) and the routes of other explorers, demonstrate the fact that sheep, cattle, and horses can be taken at a small cost and in the finest condition, from South Australia, Victoria, and New South Wales, and the inland districts of Queensland, to stock the country near the Gulf of Carpentaria, or for exportation to India or elsewhere [emphasis added].*

The tone used to describe the country fits into the colonising structure where the land is reduced to 'being a means to the colonizer's ends' (Plumwood 2003, p. 59). These statements reveal that the purposes of Landsborough's expedition were colonisation and to search for Burke's party, following 'Gregory's route from Queensland to South Australia, to a point marked first Depot on Burke's route on the map which shows the routes of different explorers' (Landsborough 1862, p. 40).

Landsborough records that they 'took many opportunities of asking the blacks respecting the explorers they had seen', which was possible because 'Jemmy the native police trooper could speak their language' (Landsborough 1862, p. 40). The assistance of the Aboriginal guides and troopers was essential in overcoming the language barriers between the English-



speaking men and the Aboriginal peoples (Richards 2008). There is no denying that the Aboriginal troopers and guides assisted in decisions about the direction that the party should take. For example, a previous expedition searching for traces of Burke and Wills had travelled through rocky, barren and parched country, after which Fisherman said '(s)uppose you leave him river, you won't find other fellow water' (Landsborough 1963, p. 23). Following this advice they changed course and eventually came across a river and Aboriginal camp.

The party's decisions about which direction had been intended to involve help from the journals and notes of previous explorations, particularly the journal of A.C. Gregory on his 1858 search for Ludwig Leichhardt (Gregory and Gregory 1884). At the Albert River depot, where the Walker and Landsborough relief expeditions met the supplies being shipped in on the *Victoria*, Landsborough asked to read Walker's 'previous discoveries'. However, they were of 'very little assistance' as Walker 'had left instructions that while his chart and journal were in Captain Norman's charge, (Captain of the HMCS *Victoria* and Commander-in-chief of the Northern expedition parties) no one should be allowed to take notes from them' (Landsborough 1862, p. 41). Landsborough nevertheless attempted to follow Walker's tracks to the Flinders River, 'where he reported he had left the tracks of Burke's party', then managed to trace them 'with considerable difficulty for four days' to the Leichhardt River 'where so much rain had fallen on the rich soil that it was impossible to trace them farther' (Landsborough 1862, p. 41):

*From the Leichhardt River we traveled over well-watered country to the Flinders River; then traveled up that river, through fine rich pastoral country, to about latitude 20 degrees 40 minutes; from there we reached Bowen Downs in a few miles. The creeks and the river that water that country I knew previously to a*

*certain point down the river, but beyond this point I did not know where the river flowed. On this expedition I followed it down to near its junction with the Barcoo River (formerly known as the Victoria and as the Cooper) and discovered that it was the Thomson River. After leaving the well-watered country of Bowen Downs, with the assistance of one of the blacks of that locality, we came through a fine rich country to the Barcoo River; then without following the river further, or searching ahead for water, we went across to the Warrego River without the horses being at any time longer than a day and part of a night without water (Landsborough 1862, p. 41).*

This excerpt reveals the reliance on Aboriginal guides through certain parts of the journey. Of particular interest is how Landsborough was guided through country, his relationship with the guides, how stories of place influenced both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the expedition party and how each person related to the country and people they met. Each of these aspects will be analysed with reference to a particular encounter on the Barcoo River.

## Stories that influenced encounters with people and place

A letter to the Royal Society explains that a violent encounter with Aboriginal people on the Barcoo River was regrettable but necessary:

*I am sorry to have to inform you that our familiarity at last led to our having a hostile collision with them on the Barcoo River, near where the blacks treacherously tried to take Mr Gregory's party by surprise during the night. They tried to take us at night by surprise. If they had succeeded they would no doubt have overpowered us; but it was during Jemmy's watch and, as he always kept his watch well, he awoke us when they were within a few yards of our fire, and*



*we fortunately succeeded in driving them away. Next morning (very early) two of them came near our camp. At my request Jemmy warned them to leave us, for we had now a most hostile feeling towards them. Instead of their showing the least symptom of leaving us they got their companions (who were in ambush, heavily armed with clubs and throwing-sticks) to join them. Under these circumstances we fired on them. In doing so, and in following them up to where the horses were feeding, one was shot and another slightly wounded in the leg (Landsborough 1963, p. 57).*

It is important to note that Landsborough believed that it was his 'familiarity' with the Aboriginal people that led to this 'hostile collision', so in an attempt to understand his familiarity and the hostility we need to explore the events leading up to this encounter, and the stories that influenced it.

On 13 March, the party was heading towards the Barcoo River area: from the 'path along the rising ground we observed, in the distance, a number of blacks, near the river ... also that birds chiefly consisting of pigeons, cockatoos, quail, and hawks, were seen in great abundance'. The following day Landsborough (1862, pp. 83–84) wrote: 'When we had come seven miles, over rich well-grassed downs, we observed a great number of blacks on a level flat ... Mr. Bourne and I approached them, and they all ran away, except some gins and children, who hid themselves in a waterhole'. Bourne (1862, p. 34) gave a more detailed account of the encounter:

*March 14 – Camp 26 – To-day we saw, on a large plain to our right, a lot of natives. Feeling anxious to get a nearer view of them, I started in pursuit, followed by Mr. Landsborough. They, seeing us approach, separated into two bodies, the men outrunning the gins, excepting one immense fat fellow who endeavoured for a short time to drive them before him. By urging our horses into a gallop, we soon*

*overtook them, when, as if by magic, they all disappeared. We pulled up and found they had jumped into a waterhole, and were lying under every bush and log they could find, with just the nostril and mouth above water. Perfect silence prevailed, although there were some very young children, and an inexperienced person would have passed the spot, little thinking that thirty human beings were hiding like a lot of wounded wild ducks. We could not induce them to answer us, so I determined to go in and drive them out. Their terror when I jumped into the water was extreme; they must have thought me a fiend, to judge from the expression of their faces. After being driven from their hiding place, they attempted to propitiate us by offering us two of the best looking girls, which present of course was declined. We made them a few presents, gave them a little bread which they would not eat, and let them go. They were a very good sample of natives, far superior to those seen down south, living upon rats, mussels, fish, &c., which are plentiful here, and no doubt wallaby, emu, and kangaroo are also easily got in the neighbourhood of these mountains. While bathing, which we never omit, I was able to get a large supply of mussels, the boys getting many more; we have had a great feast for once. Myall and boree plentiful.*

Bourne's suggestion that the Aboriginal people must have thought him a fiend is an interesting point that deserves further discussion. Howitt, who led the relief expedition that found Burke and Wills' bodies and the survivor, King, became quite knowledgeable about the people and places of Cooper Creek and the Barcoo River areas. He found a 'belief among the Yantruwunter [Yandruwandha] natives that white men were once blacks' and was himself asked by some old Aboriginal men 'how long it was since' he 'was a blackfellow' (Howitt 1878, p. 307). He was even told that he 'had once been a Yantruwunter – one of the Mungalle family'

(Howitt 1878, p. 307). The Yandruwandha people believed in 'jumping-up of blackfellows as white men' (Howitt 1878, p. 308). Although the area to which Bourne's story related was not Yandruwandha country it could be assumed that its inhabitants held similar beliefs. Clark and Cahir (2011) wrote about the Kulin Aboriginal word *Ngamadjidj* as a term explaining how western Victorian Aboriginal groups reportedly 'recognised Europeans as deceased clan members who had returned to life' (p. 105): 'the arrival of Europeans caused many to conclude that these newcomers must have belonged to the land, or at least knew of it, in a previous life' (Clark and Cahir 2011, p. 106). Howitt (1878, p. 307) made a similar observation of the Yandruwandha people who 'cannot imagine how we can travel from place to place in straight lines, or how we can speak any of their languages, without having at one time been blacks in their country'. Although reactions to explorers would have been diverse, and most likely strongly anchored in fear and terror (Reynolds 2006b, p. 42), the inclusion of non-Aboriginal into Aboriginal spirituality reveals the overlap of two different cultures creating a new way of belonging and adapting to the changing environment. It seems that Aboriginal people in many areas of Australia believed that the white men who travelled through and settled in their country were once black, and the placement of non-Aboriginal people within Aboriginal cosmology was thus a way of synthesising the changes occurring in their society.

Not only was this useful for the Aboriginal people, but it must also have given the newcomers a greater sense of belonging to country and with the Indigenous people – or a sense of superiority over the Aboriginal people. Howitt 'only found one native guide who could make a straight course' and said that Aboriginal people 'often remarked' on how he (and other non-Aboriginal explorers) 'travelled in straight lines across the sandhills, while the natives took the easiest

line through them', as though travelling in a straight line were better than following the easier path (Howitt 1878, p. 307). It appears that the placement of non-Aboriginal peoples into an Aboriginal spiritual belief system moved the explorers towards adopting a specific relationship to people and place. As mentioned above, Howitt believed the Aboriginal people thought that he was formerly Aboriginal because of his ability to travel from 'place to place in straight lines' (Howitt 1878, p. 307). Travelling in straight lines denied Aboriginal 'dream songs or *begere*, relating the adventures of ancestral beings' (Berndt and Berndt 1999, p. 369) and stories of place. Howitt did follow and assume Aboriginal beliefs and protocols of ways of being in country, but his use of brutal force in obtaining and keeping Aboriginal guides (Howitt 1878, p. 307) revealed his sense of colonial superiority over Aboriginal people. Following Aboriginal protocols was not something that the Landsborough expedition consistently did, as revealed in another perspective of the interaction at the water hole on 14 March:

*We remained near them for a short time, and were joined by Jemmy and Jackey. The gins and children soon abandoned their hiding-place, and assembled on the bank, where they had their coolamans filled with rats. The old gins repeatedly offered the wives of the men who had run away from us. Amongst the females whom I observed, was a girl about ten years old, with a large bone stuck through the cartilage of her nose. We declined the offer, although I dare say Jackey would have taken one of the ratcatchers with him: but Jemmy said he would not, as he does not approve of wedded life. He has seen it, I presume, under disadvantageous circumstances. The young gins had fine eyes, white teeth, and good expression. The children looked particularly lively and intelligent. Jemmy understood a few words of their language, but not sufficient to get*

*information from them. Their word for water, 'cammo,' I caught while we were getting them to fill our pint pots with water. After bidding them farewell, Mr. Bourne and Jackey proceeded after the packhorses: Jemmy and I went up the flat to a place about three and a-half miles south of Bramston Range (Landsborough 1963, pp. 83–84).*

Not only did the white men frighten the Aboriginal people by playing up the role of 'fiend', they may have perceived the Aborigines' behaviour as worship of the 'whites'. Through rejecting the propitiatory offering of 'two of the best looking girls' and ignoring the opportunity for reciprocation – the denial of 'wife lending' (Berndt and Berndt 1999, p. 189) – the expedition party separated itself from the local Aboriginal people, creating a sense of superiority and detachment from people and place. Not only were the white men declining the offer of Indigenous women, Jemmy was also denying his traditional culture.

Jemmy's disapproval of wedded life can be interpreted several ways. He may have been homosexual: according to Berndt and Berndt (1999, pp. 188–189, 195) marriage was 'expected' with a 'stress on heterosexual relations' and homosexuality was apparently traditionally 'not encouraged'. However, without knowing Jemmy's orientation, this discussion will continue on the assumption that after Jemmy's parents were shot by 'whites', he believed that if he married and had children they might have suffered a similar fate, and thus he declined. Or it could be assumed that Jemmy, growing up without his family and outside his society, missed initiation into traditional cultures and ways of being. Berndt and Berndt (1999, p. 188) held that childhood is 'preparation for marriage' and a 'boy can be reasonably sure that he will follow in the steps of his father and grandfather'. If Jemmy missed out on childhood because he was taken away from his family, it is easy to believe that he missed various rituals of initiation and thus may not

have been regarded as a true adult. Jemmy's removal from his country may have meant that no wife was selected for him (Berndt and Berndt 1999). Was Jemmy denying his culture or did he not know his traditional culture? Or did he hope that he too would 'jump-up a whitefella' and was thus embracing the culture of colonisation as a way to belong? Or did he believe that he was already a 'whitefella'? For whatever reason, Jemmy was not prepared to carry on Aboriginal traditions. He was more committed to following in Landsborough's footsteps and declined the offer of Aboriginal women.

A second series of encounters began on 2 April. Landsborough and Jemmy were travelling ahead of the remainder of the party 'looking for a camping place' when a 'number of natives ran out from the creek and followed' them 'for two or three miles' (Bourne 1862, p. 38). The party made it a rule to not let the Aborigines see where they camped:

*It was getting late, I did not wait to speak to them, but they followed us so close that I was compelled to stop the horses, turn them about, and face them, upon one of the black boys telling me that one very powerful fellow was running behind me and shaking his boomerang, as if about to throw it. The other kept a more respectful distance, but this fellow seemed determined to do as he pleased. Upon seeing him in the act of throwing his boomerang at me, I fired a bullet from my revolver so close to him that, although he laughed, he evidently thought it as well to keep a little further away. Jemmy, the trooper, who had asked me several times to allow him to fire, now fired his regulation pistol, the bullet of which made such a noise that he turned about and ran. Soon after, Mr. Landsborough and Jackey came up. As we were pitching camp, several more came up and took little notice of our motioning them away, until Mr. Landsborough fired a rifle at a tree, which alarmed them slightly. After*

*a time they retired about half-a-mile and camped (Bourne 1862, p. 38).*

On the same day the party 'travelled down the river till six in the evening, journeying later than usual to get out of the neighbourhood of some' Aborigines that they had 'passed about seven miles back'. Earlier that day Landsborough and Jackey had noticed some Aboriginal people nearby and perceived them to be a threat: they 'galloped towards them to make them run away; but instead of doing so, they remained and received' the whites 'in a friendly manner, and offered ... spears and boomerangs' (Landsborough 1963, p. 92). In an interesting example of cultural exchange and overlap and consideration of Aboriginal protocols of reciprocity (Berndt and Berndt 1999, p. 1210), Landsborough let Jackey take a spear and two boomerangs: 'the spear we wanted for making ramrods; in return for their presents I gave them a tomahawk'. Landsborough and Jackey caught up with the rest of the expedition party and Bourne informed him 'that the blacks had followed ... for about three miles, and that one of them, a powerfully built man, about six feet high, had been so very bold, that he [Mr. Bourne] had repeatedly fired over his head without causing him any alarm; and that on one occasion, on looking around, he saw him apparently in the act of throwing his boomerang at him' (Landsborough 1963, pp. 92–93). It is interesting to note that Bourne claimed to have shot only one bullet over the Aborigine's head but Landsborough said that Bourne fired repeatedly. Perhaps Bourne was trying to justify his actions – exaggerating the perceived danger to make the need for violent retaliation more credible. Or perhaps Landsborough was suggesting that the Aborigines were more of a threat and more persistent than Bourne thought, and he was pre-empting more dangerous encounters.

However, Landsborough (1963, p. 93) noted that his meeting with the Aborigines earlier in the day was useful. They told

Jemmy, who understood their language, 'that they had seen nothing of any explorers with camels'. After setting up their camp for the evening the party noticed that the Aboriginal people were near to the site that the party had chosen:

*I was sorry to find that we had not got out of the neighbourhood of the blacks, as I observed some of them were watching us from behind some trees close at hand. Jemmy told them that I was angry at them for following us. In reply, they said I was mistaken, that they had not followed, they had never seen us before. Shortly afterwards, Jemmy had a long conversation with them, during which, they informed him they had seen a party of explorers to the eastward, but that they had never seen any with camels or drays. When they left they assured that they would not return until morning (Landsborough 1963, p. 93).*

The following morning, 3 April, four of the Aborigines, made a second visit. Landsborough (1963, p. 93) said that 'they were very communicative' about the direction of the rivers and the state of surrounding country. Bourne (1862, p. 39) thought it was 'strange' that Jemmy and the visitors spoke the same language: 'Fortunately, but strange to say, one of them spoke the same language as the trooper Jemmy, and we obtained considerable information from him about the country, &c.; and still more strange, none of them had ever seen any one of the parties, who must have passed in this neighbourhood.'

This commonality of language raises a few questions, including whether Jemmy actually originated from this area rather than Deniliquin. Or was one of these Aborigines from Jemmy's area? Or maybe the Aborigines were not speaking the same language? Why did Bourne consider it strange that they could speak the same language? And why did he think it even stranger that they had not seen Burke and Wills? Was Bourne sensing something that

he did not include in his journal? Bourne (1862, p. 39) wrote that:

*They were anxious to examine our firearms, and so I fired my revolver close to one's head, when they ran off much alarmed, but returned upon our assuring them we were not angry. We gave them an old rasp to make into a tomahawk, and some bread, with which they were much pleased. However, nothing can be clearer to anyone who knows them well, that they would overpower any party if possible, and hence the folly of allowing them to come too near in any numbers.*

These interactions and exchanges with the local Aboriginal people reveal important moments of mutual dependency expressing the significant overlap that occurred between people and cultures. The Aborigines showed great interest in the firearms; 'news of the danger and mysterious power of firearms was almost certainly passed on to the Aborigines before they came into physical contact with Europeans' (Reynolds 2006b, p. 37). They were obviously cautious of the weapons and apparently afraid of the gunshot, but Bourne was still intimidated by the strength and power of the Aborigines even though they did not carry and use guns. It took great strength, courage and determination for the Aborigines to approach the explorers for the purpose of learning their cultural practices.

Bourne giving the rasp to the Aboriginal people to make a tomahawk is another interesting example of adaptation, involving the useful term 'entangled objects' (Rowlands 2011, p. 183). The sharing of cultural objects was not one-way; for example, the explorers used Aboriginal spears as ramrods (Landsborough 1963, p. 92). The exchanges display the willingness of Aboriginal people to learn as much as possible from passing strangers and to use others' cultural objects in a way that suited their needs.

On 5 April the party made camp at a 'fine deep waterhole at least sixty yards wide, very deep, and a mile in length', which Bourne (1862, p. 39) believed to be the Thomson

River proper. The surrounding country was 'wretchedly dry' and seemingly had no 'rain for twelve months, and certainly did look something like a desert' (Bourne 1862, p. 39). After making camp, the party received a visit from the people local to the area. Landsborough (1963, p. 95) recorded that 'a middle-aged black fellow, two youths, and two little boys paid us a visit; they were very friendly, but we did not get any information from them'. Bourne (1862, p. 39) described them as 'very quiet and friendly'; 'one of them has an iron tomahawk which he must have had for years, as it was worn almost to the eye' but he could not 'learn from him where he got it'. In Queensland, iron tomahawks were the most common tools offered to Indigenous people (Rowlands 2011). Perhaps these Aboriginal people had visited the settled areas or had traded for the axe. Or perhaps it was a cultural exchange with a prior expedition. For example, the Gregory party had travelled near the Barcoo River in 1858, four years prior to the Landsborough party, in search of Ludwig Leichhardt.

Sunday 6 April was a day of rest. They 'did not think the blacks numerous or dangerous in the neighbourhood ... we rested ourselves and horses' (Landsborough 1963, p. 95):

*The elderly blackfellow and one of the others we had seen yesterday paid us a visit, and in the course of the day he brought the others of his party, and a man about his own age, whom we had not seen before. He made me understand that his elderly friend wanted to see a gun, so I gratified his curiosity. The boys did not run away as they had done when they saw me fire a shot on a previous occasion. The blacks examined with great curiosity our equipment, and accepted greedily everything we gave them, but did not steal anything. Mr Bourne gave our newest acquaintance a shirt, which pleased him very much. They relished some food he gave them, and said, 'Thank you, sir,' upon Jackey making*



*them understand it was proper to say so. The presents which pleased them most were a broad file, a needle and thread, a broken glass bottle, and clothes. The file they could make a better tomahawk of than their stone ones; the broken glass bottle they would use for knives or wood scrapers. We did not give them many clothes, as cold weather had warned us we had none to spare. Jemmy, on further acquaintance with the blacks, found they could speak a language he understood.*

The party reached Bowen Downs on 7 April and the local Aboriginal people told Jemmy of a suitable path to follow: the party had to 'cross on to the river mentioned by the natives, which must be the Victoria, or Cooper's Creek, here called the Barcoo, and from the dry appearance of the country there is not likely to be much water between the rivers' (Bourne 1862, p. 40). The path was apparently a 'well-watered road leading to a river to the southward. On that river they said the blacks had clothes, and it was from them that they got their iron tomahawks' (Landsborough 1963, p. 96).

Landsborough told Bourne to let Jemmy lead in the direction pointed out, while Landsborough and Jackey made an observation of the sun. Bourne and Jemmy saw smoke in the distance and changed direction towards that point, because 'the country is very dry, the black boys, as well as myself, think there is water close to this fire which has not long been lighted by the natives' (Bourne 1862, p. 40). Landsborough and Jackey followed the tracks and caught up with Jemmy and Bourne; after travelling further together 'they reached at dark a water channel with no water in it, so Landsborough told Fisherman and Jemmy to guide them back to the last camp' (Landsborough 1963, p. 96):

*After travelling a considerable distance, and when I thought we ought to be near our camp, I ascertained our guides had not the slightest idea of our situation. As I had been misled by them, and had*

*paid no attention to the route we had come, I was rather at a loss which way to go. I judged, however, that the horses would take us to the river, so let them go their own way. At 4 in the morning, when we had travelled for some time in a N.E. direction, we stopped and tied up the horses till 7.10 (Landsborough 1963, p. 96).*

The next day the party reached its previous camp, to find the Aborigines gone. Landsborough attempted to repair his damaged sextant, but was 'so unsuccessful as to make it useless' (Landsborough 1963, p. 96). Was he nervous about the direction that his guides were taking him? Had Jemmy intentionally misled the party towards the distant smoke, or was it an honest mistake? Had the local Aboriginal people deliberately misled the whole party? Was Jemmy supporting the locals?

The next day, Jemmy and Landsborough left the camp in search of water. Following the directions that Jemmy had received a few days prior from the Aboriginal people:

*We expected to find in that distance a well-watered river, which Jemmy understood the blacks to say formed the river a short distance below the camp. As we had not found it there we went west, and reached the river in about four and a half miles. We then followed it down for about two miles in a southward direction, where we found the blacks we had seen up the river. Upon telling them we had not found water back from the river, and that we now wanted them to show us the road to the next river, and would give them a tomahawk and a shirt for doing so, they promised if we would bring our party down the river they would do so. We saw here two old gins and a little girl, whom we had not seen before. One of the gins was a disfigured looking object; she had lost her nose and her lips. The little girl was about four years old; she had good features, and was fat and plump. To please the blacks, we let one*

*of the little boys ride a horse for a short distance. After asking them to remain in this neighbourhood we returned to camp (Landsborough 1963, p. 97).*

Upon returning to camp on 10 April, Landsborough ascertained that Gregory's party had traced the Thompson River to its head and therefore the nearby river was unlikely to be the Thompson. He determined 'as we had used most of our stores, to leave the river, if possible, and start for the settled districts. It was very vexatious to come to this resolution, as the river was flowing almost in the direction of Burke's starting point on Cooper's Creek'. This decision suggests that Landsborough was increasingly concerned – water was hard to find, the stores had run low, the party had lost direction and possibly been misled by the Aborigines. He may have thought that their lives were in danger and that without a functioning sextant it would be difficult to follow Gregory's route. Their only hope of finding water and a safe passage back to the settled regions was with the help of local Aborigines.

It took five hours to reach the place where the party had arranged to meet the Aboriginal people upon whom their lives now depended. Landsborough wrote that 'the blacks were waiting for us, and conducted us about half a mile further down the river to a good place for our encampment' (1963, p. 97). This appeared to be the first time that the exploration party accepted the assistance of locals in regard to campsite selection.

The Landsborough expedition and its guides did not appear to follow Aboriginal protocols for approaching groups while travelling. In his notes from Cooper Creek, Howitt explained protocol on approaching Aboriginal groups:

*... on nearing any camp, when accompanied by a guide, we have had to halt while he went forward. He got on some high ground in sight of the camp, and began to bawl out something, holding a branch in his hand. The other*

*blacks from the camp would bawl out in reply for some minutes; the women and children would be seen to scurry off in haste. Then several blacks would come forward, and a camping-ground shown to us (Howitt 1878, p. 307).*

When Aboriginal guides offered this kind of introduction to people and country the explorers were given a safer passage through other peoples' territory. However, none of the Aboriginal guides on the Landsborough expedition displayed any sign of understanding or following that protocol, and it could be assumed that the lack of cultural awareness would have made the party unwelcome in some areas and with some of the locals. They did seem to follow concepts of reciprocity or trade, which could make relationships between the groups comfortable and friendly.

Bourne (1862, pp. 40–41) wrote that the local Aborigines:

*... went with us to Camp and remained until evening, when we sent them away to their own camp, giving them some rations, the trooper (Jemmy) showing them how to bake a damper, which astonished them very much. They were very suspicious of eating anything we gave them at first, but soon got over it. One young man among them was particularly amusing, imitating every gesture I made, and showing a great inclination to pilfer everything he could. He was very tall, with an immense protruding stomach, no doubt the effect of hard times and starvation in his earlier days. From his very peculiar formation I christened him with the rather vulgar cognomen of 'Potgut,' with which he was delighted, repeating it incessantly. He succeeded afterwards in stealing a paniken, notwithstanding our vigilance.*

The same evening, Landsborough gave a pound of flour to an Aboriginal man in payment, as the next day he would walk to see if there were water in the waterholes 'on the road to Barcoo River' (Landsborough

1963, p. 97). Landsborough also 'gave the blacks a comb, and Jackey pleased them very much by combing their hair' (1963, p. 97). The Aboriginal men reported 'that the waterholes they had gone to were empty. They told us of two practicable roads to the Barcoo River. One by Stark Creek from a place up the river, the other from a place down the river; the latter we determined to try' (Landsborough 1963, p. 97). The next day the party left, with two of the local Aborigines as guides.

The guides led the party down the river, to show them the road to the Barcoo River:

*This morning we mounted an old black named Witten on horseback, who promised, for a consideration, viz., tomahawk, blanket, &c., to show us over to the Barcoo. It required some persuasion to induce him to mount at first, and his essay at riding was very amusing. Perfectly naked, on an old very uneven saddle, with two straps for stirrups, and a piece of rope for a bridle, it was wonderful how he managed to keep his seat at all. He clung to the horse just as a baboon would, and when he did fall, which he could not avoid occasionally, he did so in such a way as to create roars of laughter, nor did he seem to think much of it after the first tumble. We had made thirteen miles down the river S.S.W., when the old black meeting some of his tribe declined going any further to-day, so I camped, lest he should leave us, Mr. Landsborough, having stopped behind to take the sun, not overtaking us until we had camped. Country very dry, and natives quiet (Bourne 1862, p. 41).*

On 13 April the party was 'glad to find that' Wittin:

*... had determined to accompany us. He brought an intelligent looking white-headed old man to the camp, and a fine tall well-proportioned young gin, with a little boy, the two latter remaining some distance from our camp. Wittin showed his friend our guns, water bottles, and*

*other things, as if he were quite familiar with them. Before starting we went to see the gin and the little boy. She was very timid, and ran away when we approached near to her (Landsborough 1963, p. 98).*

Bourne (1862, pp. 41–42) wrote:

*Having lost so much time lately, we break through the rule and travel to-day, making thirteen miles S.S.W. The country is still very dry, and may at some periods well be called a desert, two dry seasons being enough to make it so, while at other times it may be flooded and look beautiful as a garden. The uncertainty of rainfall will always be a great drawback to this part of the country, otherwise very rich. But this is more or less the case in most parts of Australia. It is very amusing to see the effect of riding on the old black. With great difficulty he gets off the horse, and when off cannot move, and seems puzzled because we are not stiff also. If he wished to run away he could not do it ... This morning an old black brought up to our Camp a gin, perfect enough in form for a Venus. He seemed very proud of her, but she did not much relish our admiring gaze. She had a fine fat little girl with her, but not her own. The old men always secure the young gins, persuading the younger men that they would disagree with them, and that the old ones are better for them. This is also the case with their food. A young man is only allowed to eat certain animals, most easily obtained, such as opossum, fish, &c., but should he be fortunate enough to get an emu, or kangaroo, &c., he must hand it over the old men, who tell him he would certainly get ill or die if he dared to eat it, and many of the young men believe it though, I dare say, there are a good many sceptics among them.*

That last passage referred to Aboriginal law, which compelled people to care for all their country. It regulated what people ate, where they hunted, whom they married and

which stories they could tell of particular places. Gammage states that across Australia 'the creation story is essentially the same: God made light, brought into being spirits and creator ancestors, and set down eternal Law for all creation' and all things 'derive from their presence or deeds, and are ruled by the Law they passed on' and this law is pivoted on the Dreaming (Gammage 2012, p. 123).

After travelling for some time 'Wittin told Jemmy that he had seen to the eastward of here, about ten moons ago, a party of travellers, consisting of four white men and four black men. He got a shirt from them, but they did not give him any bread' (Landsborough 1963, p. 98). This was the first time the party had news of other travellers from Aboriginal people. Perhaps trust had developed and Witten was willing to share information, or perhaps he was able to tell the story because he was passing through the country where this particular story occurred and belonged (see Mulligan 2003, pp. 268–289 for place-based story-telling and Gammage 2012, pp. 135–139 for songlines).

The following day they observed a range: 'Witten called it Trimpie Yawbah. Afterwards we observed other hills to the westward of Trimpie Camp the highest of which I called Mount Pring' (Landsborough 1963, p. 98). Bourne (1862, p. 42) noted that 'The old black is getting very uneasy, and wishes to return. He is getting too near the boundary of this hunting ground, and fears being killed by the blacks on the Barcoo, who, he says, are very numerous, and for whom he warned us to keep a sharp look out.' Aboriginal people 'felt intensely for their country. It was alive. It could talk, listen, suffer, be refreshed, rejoice' (Gammage 2012, p. 142). The boundaries of country or tracts of land 'are very distinctly defined, and scrupulously observed amongst themselves', a fact which 'implies the existence of personal property in the soil' (Gammage 2012, p. 142). With some persuasion, Witten 'accompanied us another day' (Bourne 1862, p. 42). Bourne

was communicating closely with Witten and understood the protocol of some Aboriginal law.

Landsborough was nervous about staying much longer in this country, and wanted Witten to remain as guide despite his fear of leaving his country. On 14 April, Landsborough 'made free with the name of Sir George Bowen, Governor of Queensland, (as though these people know of Bowen) by telling him, that if he showed us the road that the Governor would send from Brisbane to the first station formed on Bowen Downs, a medal, a tomahawk, and a blanket' (Landsborough 1963, p. 99). Presumably Landsborough wanted Witten to show them the roads towards the settled areas and not to meet with the other Aboriginal groups; Witten could not guarantee their safe passage through this part of the country. However, that evening 'Fisherman and Jackey showed Wittin corroboree dance. For the dance they painted themselves with white streaks, and with the light of the fire they looked like skeletons' (Landsborough 1963, p. 99). Gammage (2012, p. 133) stated that 'the more Law a person knows, the more certain he or she is to undertake and succeed in any activity ... the more you learn the more you are told ... those who learn most become clever people, with immense sacred and secular power'. Fisherman and Jackey, having reached the boundary of Witten's country, may have been sharing a story about their country, their Dreaming. They were sharing sacred knowledge. Witten needed to know the song of a country to be able to guide the expedition party into that neighbouring country.

Corroboree was a way for Aboriginal people to pass on stories and songs:

*Without knowing the language people still recognised their song and its dances, because each had independent embedded characteristics: painting design, colour or symbol, and song melody, rhythm or pitch. To survive its continental journey each song must in theory be exactly*

*repeated in at least most of these ways, because it came from the Dreaming, and its creator ancestor is listening (Gammage 2012, p. 126).*

Witten would have understood the song that Jackey and Fisherman performed for him. It would be interesting to know if Jemmy understood. Being 'born on or near a songline decides a person's most important totem, and being taught part of a song or dance legitimates being on the country it describes. People learn their songs, dances and country in minute detail. From far away they can discuss a tree or soak and who is responsible for it' Gammage (2012, p. 126). It is sad that Jemmy possibly missed out on learning his song.

The following day, 15 April, they steered for the eastern side of Trimpie Range. We can imagine that as they travelled Witten may have been singing up the country, perhaps he was singing Trimpie Yawbah. It is worth noting that Landsborough adopted an Aboriginal name for this range although he still took a bearing from what he identified as Mt Pring (the highest point) – obviously the naming showed respect towards Witten and his family. On 16 April Landsborough 'tried very hard to persuade Witten to show us all the way to Barcoo River. He promised to do so; but after Jackey and Jemmy went for the horses, he left the camp as if he were only going down the creek, but he did not make an appearance again' (Landsborough 1963, p. 99). Bourne notes:

*This morning, before the horses came up, the black disappeared. I was standing by the Camp fire watching him, but he walked a short distance so boldly that I did not suspect his intention of bolting then; but not seeing him return, I went after him and found he had got into the bed of a dry creek and ran along the channel out of my sight. We tried to find him without success. I am sorry he has gone without his blanket and tomahawk as he has behaved very well (Bourne 1862, p. 42).*

Witten's departure must have been confronting for Landsborough, especially once he learnt from Jemmy that Witten's 'reason for not going to Barcoo River was, that the blacks there would kill him if they found him in their country' (Landsborough 1963, p. 99). This entry indicated that Landsborough had at least a slight understanding of different language groups and the Aboriginal sense of 'country' (see Rose 2004, pp. 153–154 for definition of country). Landsborough must have become aware that he was travelling through many different countries, which may have been a result of the corroboree and/or spending time with Witten.

It is likely that Witten would have returned to or stayed on his songline, for songlines are places 'of refuge, of comfort, of communion' (Gammage 2012, p. 126). Landsborough acknowledged the ownership of Witten's 'country' and that of other Aboriginal groups through his use of the words 'their country'; he also acknowledged Aboriginal law by repeating that Witten could be killed – punished if found on that particular country. According to an Indigenous language map, the Landsborough expedition travelled through at least six different countries before reaching the Barcoo, and through up to 20 more from the Barcoo to Melbourne.

On 17 April Jemmy and Landsborough left the camp at Dunsmure Creek to go to the Barcoo River, where they would enter another country. The 'familiar' people of the previous country were behind them. After riding four miles they reached the watershed of a creek on the Barcoo side of the range and, according to an Indigenous language map, were in either Iningai or Kuungkari country (Horton 1996). Aboriginal people cut channels through watersheds; the expedition party probably saw local Aborigines trapping fish or using other means of food and resource production or management (Gammage 2012, pp. 281–305) but their cultural blindness prevented them



from truly understanding how to live in the country. In the following quotes it is revealed that Landsborough did notice the local fishing and hunting practices. After another seven miles they reached the main branch of the creek, most likely Kuungkari country. Landsborough (1963, p.100) noted that it:

*... had extensive floodmarks, and heaps of mussel-shells on its banks, but the waterholes in its channels were empty. I named it the Archer Creek. After following Archer's Creek for thirteen miles, we reached its junction with the Barcoo River. I was glad to find that the channel of the river was full of water; and as there were fresh tracks of blacks near the river, I supposed them to be in the neighbourhood, so, to avoid them, I returned up Archer's Creek for about four miles to some fine young grass and encamped.*

On 22 April on the Barcoo River, Landsborough and Jemmy waited behind the main party and observed the sun to get a latitude reading. As Bourne (1862, pp. 43–44) travelled to the next campsite he encountered the local Aboriginal people:

*Just at sundown, as I was making in to the river to camp (Mr. Landsborough having stayed behind to take the sun), a number of natives, alarmed by the screams of a gin who had seen us, ran out from the river, shouting, shaking their weapons, and wanting us to stop, but as it was very late I declined, until compelled to turn about and face them to keep off. They came quite within throwing distance of us, and Jackey assured me that one of them had thrown a stick at him, and begged of me to let him fire, but as I did not see it, and knowing their eagerness to shoot blacks, and wishing to use as much forbearance as possible, I just kept them off by presenting my gun whenever they came too near, until Mr. Landsborough came, as the boy with him speaks their language. When Mr. Landsborough came up they seemed friendly enough upon*

*hearing themselves addressed in their own tongue. We gave them a few presents and told them to go to their own camp, and come to ours in the morning, but not during the night, or we would shoot them. We camped a mile or so above them on the river.*

This entry showed that the expedition party was unaware of the protocol that should be observed upon approaching or entering into another country or campsite. It appeared that the Aborigines were desperately trying to warn the whites not to go any further, or to announce themselves, or perhaps they were telling the party that they were not welcome. As Reynolds (2006b, p. 42) explained, 'So much about the whites – their appearance, behaviour, possessions, accompanying animals – were radically new' so if this were the first time the Aborigines had seen white people their fear, anxiety and curiosity must have been great. Even if it was not the first expedition they had encountered, these strangers were breaking Aboriginal law. The tension eased after Jemmy arrived and spoke to them in their language, or a language to which they could relate. Landsborough (1963, pp. 101–102) recorded his perspective of the encounter:

*... we passed nets for catching emeu [sic], and nets for catching fish. We then passed an elderly gin and a little boy watching earnestly our main party, and immediately afterwards we came upon about a dozen blacks. Mr. Bourne informed me that they had followed him for several miles, and had persisted in approaching nearer than was desirable. Jemmy had a long conversation with them respecting the explorers they had seen, and also respecting the route towards the settled districts, which he learned some of them had visited. They said they did not remember any explorers who had larger animals than horses, and strange to say, none who had drays. We presented them with glass bottles, an empty powder flask, and some hair from*

*the horses' tails. Jemmy told them we wanted to encamp, and that we did not wish to be too near them. They continued to follow us, and on Jemmy asking them why they did so, they replied they wanted a light. We gave them one, and they left; but after we had camped we found they had encamped very near us.*

Considering the expedition party had travelled through so many different language groups, and assuming Jemmy was actually from Deniliquin, or Wiradjuri country, it could be assumed that there were language barriers between Jemmy and the local Aboriginal people. During that night:

*Jemmy, the trooper, awoke us by saying the blacks were in the Camp. One had got close up to him as he sat by the fire, but ran back on seeing him rise. We rose at once, but as it was very dark we could only hear them among some trees quite close to our Camp, walking and talking slowly. I told Jemmy to ask them what they wanted, they replied, a fire-stick. Upon hearing the voice I fired in that direction (as did all but Mr. Landsborough), hoping to hit one by chance, as it was so dark we could not see them. They moved away, showing many firesticks in their retreat, proving the want of one a mere excuse and a specimen of their cunning. We then tried to send up a rocket, but they were so damaged they would not act, and only created some merriment amongst the niggers (Bourne 1862, pp. 44–45).*

Perhaps they repeatedly requested fire as it was the only word or term they could share with Jemmy, or perhaps Jemmy had misunderstood and they were not even requesting fire. A further entry in Bourne's journal showed continuing miscommunication:

*This morning, very early, two men made their appearance first, and sat down within ninety yards of our Camp. Mr.*

*Landsborough told them, through Jemmy, to go away, as he was angry at their coming up to the Camp at night; but they either did not understand Jemmy or took no notice, and were immediately joined by about twenty more, who squatted round their fire-sticks in two circles, the morning being very cold ...*

*We were now perfectly safe from these men, as they had no spears but only a few throwing sticks and boomerangs which are comparatively harmless, nor did they show any disposition to attack us in any way, but Mr. Landsborough, finding they would not go away, gave the order to fire a volley on them, which we did as they sat, wounding one very severely; the rest took to their heels and disappeared in a moment (Bourne 1862, pp. 44–45).*

Bourne, the second-in-command, recognised that the Aborigines were virtually unarmed – they had no spears. Landsborough, however, may have been culturally blind. He acted upon his misunderstanding and fear, ordering his men to fire upon the seemingly harmless Aborigines who were sitting on the ground – which cannot be regarded as a threatening posture. Bourne (1862, pp. 44–45) explained more of the encounter:

*They are very timid, and seldom or never stand for a second shot nor can any encounter with the unfortunate wretches be dignified by the name of a fight. The wounded man had by this time managed, with difficulty, to crawl about 150 yards away, but was overtaken by Mr. Landsborough, Jemmy, and Jackey, and despatched by two different shots, though begging hard for his life.*

'Though begging hard for his life', the unarmed Aboriginal man was shot. It is interesting that Bourne referred to the Aborigine as a 'man', not a native, a nigger or a black, but as a man – just like the 'men' of the expedition party. Was Bourne feeling

empathy towards this unfortunate Aboriginal man?

His journal did not always show implicit empathy, however. As shown in the quote below, he was again not involved in a shooting incident but defended the actions of those who were: 'Some of the horses being close to Camp we caught two and sent two boys after the rest; they reported having slightly wounded one man they had found secreted in a waterhole. It is more than probable that, had we all been asleep last night, we should have been killed' (Bourne 1862, pp. 44–45). Bourne also wrote words of admiration for the strength of these Aboriginal men: 'Passed a great many to day but did not stop. These natives are fine muscular fellows, and are very hardy, as they are perfectly naked; and although the nights are bitterly cold they sleep entirely without covering, merely making a fire on each side of them, few thinking it necessary to do this even' (Bourne 1862, pp. 44–45).

The varied interpretations of this incident are important when we consider concepts of cultural blindness, cultural seeing, mutual adaptation and sense of place and belonging. The expedition was dependent upon Jemmy, the native police trooper, yet lacked any obvious connection with or understanding of the Aboriginal people encountered:

*The blacks came up, and probably would have overpowered us if they had found us all asleep; but Jemmy, the native trooper, who always keeps his watch well, awoke us, and all of our party except one discharged their guns in the direction from where we heard the blacks. I reserved my charge to shoot at them when I caught sight of them, which I did not succeed in doing until after daylight. We set off two sky-rockets, but they did not go up well, because they were bruised, or because the sticks we attached to them were unsuitable. When the first rocket exploded, it made the blacks laugh; at the explosion of the second we did not hear them do so as they had probably*

*retired to some distance (Landsborough 1963, pp. 102–103).*

It is difficult to believe that the Aboriginal people would laugh at a failed skyrocket considering they had most likely never experienced one before so had no idea that it had failed and that laughing at this would insult the explorers. What it does reveal is Landsborough's fear of Aboriginal people and his attempt to dominate with brutal force:

*After the conduct of the blacks last night, and as they approached Gregory's party in a similar way in the same neighbourhood, I fully intended to shoot at them if we had a chance; but this morning, although three approached to within one hundred yards of us while we were eating our breakfast, I did not fire at them until Jemmy had warned them of our hostile feeling towards them, and until they, instead of attending to the warning they had received to be off, got most of their companions, who were heavily loaded with clubs and throwing sticks, to approach within about the same distance of our position. I then gave the word and we fired at them. The discharge wounded one and made the rest retire. Some of us followed them up as far as the horses, and again fired, and shot the one who had been wounded previously. Afterwards Jackey slightly wounded another, when Jemmy and he went for the horses. Perhaps these blacks, as they said they had visited the settled country, may have had a part in the massacre of the Wills family Landsborough (1963, pp. 102–103).*

It is important that these Aborigines had visited the settled district and that Landsborough justified the killing by referring to the Wills family massacre and an incident involving Gregory in which his party attacked Aborigines, due to fear of attack on themselves. The Gregory party, while attempting to reach the Thompson River, came upon a 'fine lagoon nearly a mile in length ... surprised a party of natives,

who decamped ... leaving their net, fish, etc.' which Gregory 'of course left untouched, and camped at a spot lower down the lagoon' (Gregory and Gregory 1884, p. 250). The Gregory party made efforts to not disturb the Aboriginal people, however, Gregory did not follow protocol and announce the arrival of his party and request permission to camp:

May 9

*The next day being Sunday, we remained at our camp, and the party of natives consisting of seven or eight men, three or four women, and some children, approached us, and remained the greater part of the day near the tents. They were very anxious to enter the camp, but this was not permitted. By signs they expressed that they had observed we had not taken away any of their property the evening before, when they ran away and left their nets, and were therefore satisfied our intentions were friendly, but we could not procure any information relative to the objects of our journey or the character of the country before us. At 4 p.m. they informed us they were going to sleep at the most distant part of the lagoon, and would return next morning at sunrise, and then departed. After dark, however, the natives were detected attempting to crawl into the camp through the bushes, and though we called to them in an unmistakable tone to retire, they would not withdraw. As the position they had taken up was such as to command our camp, and render it unsafe in the event of an attack, it was necessary to dislodge them. I therefore fired a pistol over them, but was answered by a shout of derision, which no doubt would have been soon followed by a shower of spears had we not compelled them to retreat by a discharge of small shot directed into the scrub, after which we were not further molested (Gregory and Gregory 1884, p. 250).*

## Conclusion

This urge to act before crisis eventuated, this fear of attack, must come from a previous personal experience or from stories of conflict between explorers and Aboriginal people. Gregory clearly stated that he was afraid of a shower of spears, a fear that may have stemmed from the fate of Kennedy who died after being speared within the vicinity of Cape York, an area where Gregory had previously travelled. He may have used Kennedy's journal and records to assist with his exploration.

Second, the people of the Barcoo mentioned that they had visited the settled districts and Landsborough assumed that they might have been responsible for the Wills family (unconnected with Burke and Wills) massacre – he used the possibility as justification for killing a defenceless person. Near the Nagoa River, 400 km west of the Fitzroy River in Queensland, the Wills family were massacred in October 1861 shortly after they reached their new home, Cullin-la-Ringo. This country is approximately 700 km east of the Barcoo. On 17 October, 18 of the settlers were killed and three escaped. News spread quickly to the settled districts and the native police force was sent to find the people responsible for the massacre. A terrible revenge followed, in which at least 70 Aboriginal people were killed in 'butchery ... cruel, cold blooded, and inexcusable as any to found in the annals of the race' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1861, p. 5).

There is evidence that native police and colonisers used the Wills family massacre as an excuse to kill Aboriginal people whether or not they were connected to the massacre and without allowing the Aboriginal people a fair trial. Richards (2008, p. 24) stated that 'revenge parties operated in Central Queensland for months after the attack at Cullin-la-Ringo' and the native police force was one of the 'major causes of violent Indigenous deaths in colonial Queensland' (Richards 2008, p. 207).

Tom Wills, a survivor of the massacre, called for 'good resolute men that will shoot every black they see' in retribution for the loss of his family (Richards 2008, p. 66) but the Landsborough expedition did not shoot every Aborigine they saw. Does this reveal empathy towards Aboriginal people? Moral judgement? There is evidence of early familiarity between the Landsborough expedition and people such as Witten and his family, which suggests that the Barcoo incident was brought about by cultural blindness. The apparent sense of familiarity appeared to subside upon entering the Barcoo country, about which there were many stories that originated from the colonising structure. With greater understanding of Aboriginal law Landsborough may have safely passed through this country. Perhaps Landsborough misinterpreted Witten's warning about the Barcoo people: it appears that Witten, who perhaps did not sing that country, was not allowed in that country or had perhaps earlier broken Aboriginal law there. There is no reason behind the assumption that the people of Barcoo were responsible for the Wills family massacre; it is far more probable that they were instead victims of colonial fear and cultural blindness.

There was no reason to assume that the Barcoo people would attack the Landsborough expedition without provocation. Bourne (1862, pp. 44–45) stated that the people of the Barcoo area were 'comparatively harmless, nor did they show any disposition to attack us in any way'. The stories that came out of the colonising structure silenced the Aboriginal voice, which had the effect of separation: denial of mutual dependency added to the magnification of cultural blindness. The explorers' journals show traces of cultural seeing and mutual adaptation; by drawing upon the cultural overlaps we can create stories that are inclusive and offer cultural continuity. As this chapter has revealed, 'analysis of colonial discourse has shown

that no form of cultural dissemination is ever a one-way process' (Young 2005, p. 164): the members of the expedition party travelled through country where past experiences, stories of place and cultural practices were layered on top of each other to create an uncertain patchwork of identities and cultural entanglement.

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# **‘I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months’: reinterpreting the history of Burke and Wills**

*Ian D. Clark and Fred Cahir*

William John Wills penned those words in his journal on 6 May 1861 (Wills 1863, p. 282). Three weeks later he wrote ‘We are trying to live the best way we can, like the blacks, but find it hard work’, and left the notes in a cache at the Cooper Creek depot on 30 May 1861 (Wills 1863, p. 290). Gray had died on 17 April 1861, and by the end of June both Wills and Burke were dead – from starvation and beriberi. Another four members of the expedition met their deaths: Charles Stone died on 22 April 1861, William Purcell on 23 April, Ludwig Becker on 29 April and William Patten on 5 June. King, the only survivor of the four who made the dash for the Gulf, was adopted into the Yandruwandha who allowed him to live with them until he was found by Howitt’s relief expedition in September. The deaths of seven men and the survival of King through his adoption by the Yandruwandha represent a poignant juxtaposition of the

basic truth alluded to by Henry Reynolds (1990) – the failure to profit from Aboriginal expertise.

## **A dedication**

As part of the suite of activities organised by the Royal Society of Victoria for its sesquicentenary celebrations of the Burke and Wills expedition, the society hosted a mock coronial inquest in the Legislative Assembly of Victoria over the weekend of 23 and 24 July 2011. Dr Jane Hendtlass was the coroner presiding over the mock inquest, which investigated only the factors which may have contributed to the deaths of Burke, Wills and Gray. The coroner explored the issues of management of the expedition, the nutrition available to the four men (Burke, Wills, Gray and King), Aboriginal involvement in the exploration,

the circumstances of Gray's death and the issue of whether King murdered Burke. The coroner's findings, delivered on 19 April 2012, held that Burke's appointment as leader was a fundamental mistake which directly related to his death and those of Wills and Gray (Hendtlass 2012). In relation to nutrition, the coroner found that Gray, Burke and Wills all displayed the symptoms of beriberi, and that starvation, dehydration and thiamine deficiency contributed to their deaths. Burke's refusal to consult with local Aboriginal people meant that he did not fully appreciate how Aboriginal people prepared nardoo in a way that minimised its effect on thiamine availability. Ironically, although Burke, Wills and King were attempting to live like the Aboriginal people in their last days together at Cooper Creek, they were unaware of Aboriginal methods of food preparation, especially of the safest way to prepare nardoo. This point was well made by Phillip Clarke in Chapter 4. If Burke, Wills, King and Gray had the services of an Aboriginal guide they could have procured and prepared food, thus ensuring the group's survival. In relation to the issue of Aboriginal involvement in the expedition, the coroner agreed that 'One of the most fundamental errors made by the expedition was the decision not to utilise Aboriginal guides (either from the very start of the expedition or during the expedition) in any systematic way.' The coroner found that Charles Gray probably died from starvation, thiamine deficiency and dehydration. In relation to the final matter of the Aboriginal oral history that Burke had been shot by a white man, the coroner was reluctant to accept the report from an unnamed squatter in the *Town and Country* journal.

One of the interesting outcomes of the Burke and Wills story and the recovery of King by Howitt's relief party was the accolade given to the Yandruwandha for their hospitality in taking King into their care. Bonyhady (1991, p. 208) considered that:

*Their treatment of the explorers was one of those rare episodes in which colonists*

*recognize their full humanity. When King returned through Bendigo to Melbourne townsmen drank the Aborigines' health. Throughout November, a succession of colonists admitted their admiration for how the blacks had 'ministered to the wants of the starving white men, not out of their superfluities, but their poverty; who found them ahungered and fed them; strangers, they took them in.'* What impressed them most was how the Aborigines had treated King with such kindness and wept over Burke's corpse. 'Could Christians have done more?' one resident of Bendigo asked. 'How many professing Christians would have done as much?' But Burke's use of force against the Aborigines to deprive them of their fish was more controversial. Although some settlers excused this violence because of the explorers' situation, others were appalled at such robbery and injustice when the 'heathens had willingly fed their hungry guests'.

A recent communication from Aaron Paterson, a Yandruwandha descendant, told a story passed within the Yandruwandha, which reinforced their care of King: 'The story is that other natives came into our camp visiting and saw King and enquired what we were doing with him and why haven't we killed him. My people told the other natives to go away and say no more about him.'

In the closure to the Joyce and McCann (2011, p. 291) volume on the scientific contribution of the Burke and Wills expedition, the editors acknowledged that their work was 'one significant step' in addressing the fact that no overall scientific report, nor even any official history, of the expedition was ever published. In this volume we take another significant step forward by giving Aboriginal perspectives a central place in the narrative – the importance of Aboriginal peoples in the Victorian Exploring Expedition and the subsequent relief expeditions are no longer

forgotten narratives. We dedicate this volume to the Yandruwandha people of the Cooper and other Aboriginal peoples who featured prominently in the Burke and Wills story.

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