

The Burke and Wills Expedition

On the 19th of October 1860, members of the Victorian Exploring Expedition (Burke and Wills Expedition) left Menindee on the Darling River for the second stage of their charge across the country, Coopers Creek. Intended as a scientific expedition, it was, for Burke, a race with John MacDouall Stuart to be the first to cross the continent.

Arguments in Menindee had led to the resignation of some members of the expedition who then returned to Melbourne. Burke separated the remainder into two groups: those who would travel to Cooper Creek in an advance party, and those who would remain behind, as "back-up". Burke took just a few of the camels, some horses and only a portion of the original quota of stores.

A new guide, William Wright, was recruited in Menindee as he had recently returned from a 250 km journey toward Cooper Creek. With Wright's guidance, and that of two Aboriginal guides, Burke's expedition was able to make good progress. After marching the men across the flat, shrubby plains north of Menindee, Burke reached the rugged Byngano Ranges of Mutawintji, sacred to the Malyangapa, Wilyakali, Wanyuparku and Pantjilkali people.

There was little time to explore this secret, ancient place, and the expedition moved through the gorges and creeks with as much speed as they could muster.

Wills, second in charge, tried to keep up with the maintenance of navigational, geological and botanical recordings, work he would often complete when others were long asleep.

Successive camps were made on creeks to the north west of Mutawintji (Nuntherunga, Tellawongee, Wonnaminta and Puldramata), before taking a course slightly more towards the north east. Just ten days after leaving Menindee the group reached Torowoto Swamp. Still there was no rest, and Burke hastened across the Queensland border, and onwards to Cooper Creek.

Meanwhile, Wright returned to Menindee with instructions to retrieve the remaining camels, wagons and stores, as well as new supplies of dried meat. He would then follow Burke to Cooper Creek, meeting up, Burke calculated on November 15th. With fresh supplies the expedition was then expected to move onwards on the final stage of the expedition to cross the continent, to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The expedition reached the banks of Cooper Creek on November 11th, 1860. Meanwhile Wright's plans to follow the trail to Cooper Creek with additional animals and stores were in disarray. Without authorization of his appointment from Melbourne there was little he could do to re-assemble the stores, wagons, horses and camels, and men.

Then, a trooper named Lyons arrived with instructions to personally deliver a message to Burke regarding Stuart's progress toward the Gulf. He duly left Menindee with members of the party Wright was to have taken with him. They travelled only a little beyond Torowotto Swamp before lack of water forced them to retreat. Still, they almost perished.

The alarm was raised by an Aboriginal guide who staggered back to the Menindee camp. The rescue mission caused further delays.

Finally, on January 9th 1861 Wright received authorization for his supply trip to Cooper Creek, but it was not until January 26th that he was finally underway.

Burke, meanwhile, had made his own plans. Deciding not to wait until the cooler months, or even for Wright and the back up stores and equipment, he departed for the Gulf of Carpentaria on December 16th. He was accompanied only by Wills, King, and Gray. Burke left Brahe in charge at Cooper Creek with instructions to wait at least three months. Wills asked him to hold on for four months.

Travel from Cooper Creek toward the Gulf of Carpentaria was not exceptionally difficult. Recent rains meant that there were adequate water supplies and feed for the horses and camels. On February 9th 1861 they reached Little Bynoe River but were unable to reach the coast because of the mangrove swamps. Burke and Wills then trudged the last 24 km before retreating. They had taken fifty nine days to travel the distance from Cooper Creek, but had supplies left for just twenty seven more.

On the return journey the wet season broke and travel was very difficult. One camel was abandoned, and their only horse was shot for food. They were forced to eat native plants, and even a python to supplement supplies.

Gray, ill but believed to be malingering, was beaten by Burke. He died on April 17th, not necessarily from the beating. A day of rest followed his burial. On April 21st 1860 the remaining members of the expedition staggered into the camp on Cooper Creek. It was abandoned. A cache of supplies was found beneath a coolibah tree carved with the words "DIG 3ft. NW ". A letter from Brahe buried with the supplies indicated that he had left just that morning.

Too weak to follow, Burke, Wills and King stayed at Cooper Creek to recuperate. Later, Wills and King wanted to follow Brahe. Burke decided that they should head toward the pastoral settlement of Mount Hopeless, in South Australia, a journey that would necessitate following the creek downstream before crossing the Strzelecki Desert. Leaving no indication that they had even returned from the Gulf, they headed off on April 23rd.

Whilst returning to Menindee Brahe met up with Wright, and the two decided to return to Cooper Creek. By the time they arrived, Burke, and Wills were more than 50 km away. There was no indication that Burke had even been back at Cooper Creek, and Brahe and Wright left to rejoin the main party and head back to Menindee. Four men, including the expedition's doctor, Becker, died in the attempt to reach safety.



Figure 1 Dig Tree

Burke, Wills and King were in desperate trouble. The remaining two camels died. Without pack-animals they were unable to carry water for the trek to Mt Hopeless. With few stores remaining they accepted offers of native food from local Aboriginal tribes who were, up until this time friendly. Had Burke not fired his pistol at one of the Aboriginal men this situation may have continued. Instead, frightened by the shot, the tribe fled. By the end of June, now without any help, Burke and Wills were both dead. King found a group who were willing to supply him with food. He survived and was discovered by a rescue party led by Howitt on September 11, 1861.

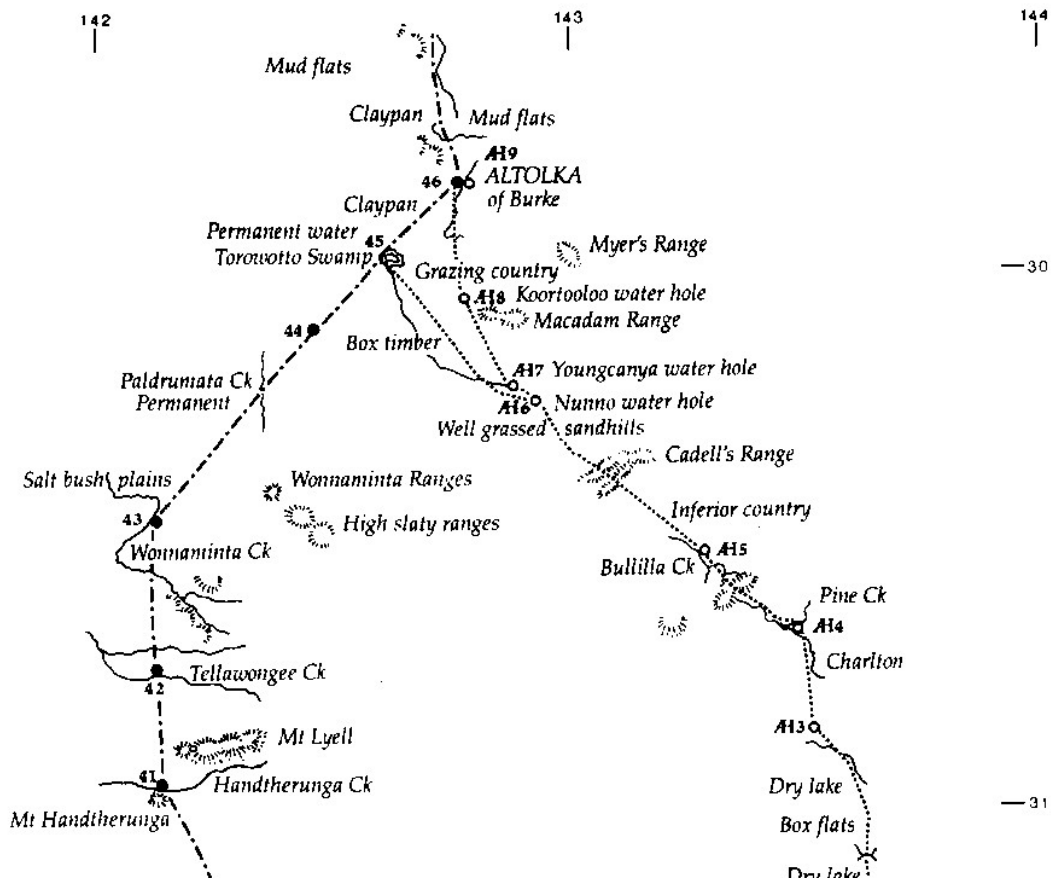


Figure 2 Map of Burke and Wills route through the Corner Country