

Charles Sturt's Central Australian Expedition: A summary

Adelaide to the Campbell's Creek

On the 10th of August 1844 Sturt's Central Australian Expedition passed through the streets of Adelaide and headed east toward the Murray River. Charles Sturt joined the men at Moorundie a few days later.

Sturt's friend, Edward John Eyre, was the Protector of Aborigines at Moorundie and had arranged for Aboriginal guides, Camboli and Nabduck, to go with the expedition. Eyre joined them also until they reached the Anabranche of the Darling River.

The expedition reached the Darling River on 24th September. There had been many encounters with curious Aboriginal people along the way and Sturt was concerned about possible attacks but his compassion for the local people ensured a safe passage.

On the 10th October the expedition reached Laidley's Pond. They were now in completely new territory and water was about to become a major concern. No one had ever explored to the north west of the river before.

The camp was moved to Cawndilla from where Poole and Mc Douall Stuart explored to Scopes Range, returning to excitedly report finding a large body of water. A few days later Sturt, Browne, Morgan, Flood also searched the hills but found no such lake. It had been a mirage.

Exploration of the rugged ranges began in earnest. A young Aboriginal guide from the Darling River area, Topar, accompanied them, leading them along Stephens Creek where they found Aboriginal wells. Sturt named the hills Stanley's Barrier Ranges.

They returned to Cawndilla on October 26th and left two again days later. Topar didn't return with them, he felt anxious leaving his traditional river country for the hills.

During the relocation the animals struggled in the heat and had very little water. Armed with shovels, Browne and Flood went ahead to the Aboriginal wells and enlarged them sufficiently to enable the thirsty animals to drink.

From the new campsite Sturt spent several more days tracing creeks and gullies, climbing peaks and crossing gorges, always looking for a safe passage and a supply of water.

Finally they came across the Gorge of the Glen where Campbell's Creek enters the plains to the west of the Ranges and where, despite the challenges of dragging wagons and carts across the hills, they were able to establish a new camp. It was now November 27th.

Campbell's Creek to Depot Glen

The next move of the main party was to Morphett's Creek, a relatively short distance along the plain to the north.

While this was happening Sturt sent Poole and Browne to the north-west in an attempt to reach "Lake Torrens" and to determine if there was any course west of there. The trip was exhausting. Travelling mostly at night, they had reached the channel between Lakes Callabonna and Frome where the Yandama Creek enters through the sand hills. Any

shallow body of water on the lake was salty, the lake impossible to cross. There was no passage through to the west.

They returned to camp on December 2nd to a very anxious Sturt.

On December 4th, after accepting Poole and Browne's advice on the impossibility of a route to the west, Sturt sent Flood scouting to the north where he found a creek with water and grass. Sturt named it after him. Flood's Creek became the next campsite.

While based on Flood's Creek Sturt sent Poole, Mack and Browne scouting northwards. They passed Mount Arrowsmith and continued north-easterly, finishing east of where Tibooburra is now located. Along the way they found a good supply of water in two creeks which would later be called Packsaddle and Evelyn Creeks.

There were several interactions with local Aboriginal people during this time, including when Sturt encountered three young women gathering seeds near a native hut. They were all understandably anxious. After being joined by an older male, Sturt offered them some dried fish before they disappeared into the nearby scrub.

In their absence, Sturt, Stuart and Flood headed across the great plain to the east of the Barrier Ranges, toward Mount Lyell, and returned to camp along a more northerly route close to the southern end of Lake Bancannia and the low hills on the northern reaches of the Barrier Ranges.

The weather was becoming increasingly hot. The water supply was dwindling and Sturt was keen to move on, but there was still no word from Poole. Christmas day 1844 came but there were no celebrations. Then, just before sunset Poole, Mack and Browne arrived back at camp, exhausted but they had found water.

On December 28th the blazing hot wind went around to the south west and a cool breeze arrived. Sturt took the opportunity to move, even though the next water lay 60 kilometres away.

They could not have anticipated the trouble that lay ahead. Poole insisted on leading the way but he became lost among the steep sand hills and thick pine scrub.

Over the next few days the heavy wagons became bogged in the loose sand, and a wagon yoke broke. The sheep could not keep up and the bullocks were distressed, two died. One of the dogs also died, and the paws burned off another. The situation was dire, they had no water and temperature was extreme. Then Mack, a junior member of the team, spoke up about having seen a shallow lake in the Packsaddle Creek. It was the salvation of the expedition.

Wagons were abandoned to speed up getting the animals to water, and had to be retrieved later when the bullocks had recovered.

On January 7th 1845 the trek continued northwards and until reaching a small waterhole in Burr Creek near Mount Arrowsmith where they camped over-night. Further on, veering lightly north-westerly they crossed the stony open plains, and finally reached Evelyn Creek on January 12th 1845.

At Evelyn Creek the main party of the expedition paused for ten days while Sturt, Browne and Flood scouted northward. Sturt passed Whittabrinna Creek, McDonald Peak, and pushed northward over the plains, circling to the west to examine Stokes Range.

From the top of Stokes Range he observed:

"A dark and gloomy sea of scrub without a break in its monotonous surface met our gaze. I could not but think from the appearance of the country as far as we had gone that we could not be very far from the outskirts of an inland sea, it so precisely resembled a low and barren sea coast. This idea I may say haunted me, and it was the cause of my making a second journey to the same locality."

They headed back to Evelyn Creek camping one night on Frome Creek on the way.

On Sturt's reaching the camp Poole reported that he had found water in a rocky glen a few kilometres upstream. He had found "The Depot" (Preservation Creek), to which they moved on 27th January.

Depot Glen

When the new camp was settled Sturt and Poole scouted to the west for about 30 kilometres before returning to The Depot.

On February 8th 1845 he made another trip to the north taking McDouall Stuart, Flood and Cowley with him.

Leaving Stuart and Flood near a waterhole beyond where Tibooburra now lies, Sturt travelled on with Cowley. It was a horrendous journey. The heat was intense and they had very little water for themselves or the horses. They were in sand and spinifex country that Sturt described as *"one of the most gloomy regions that man ever traversed"*. Turning back probably saved their lives.

On February 16th Sturt and Cowley met up with Stuart and Flood and decided to follow Frome's Creek to the west. It terminated in the grassy basin of Lake Pinnaroo which Sturt described as "The Park". Later they would establish Fort Grey at this site.

They arrived back at the camp at Preservation Creek on 21st February 1845.

Still keen to explore the surrounding areas, Sturt followed the Evelyn Creek south to Cobham Lake, then headed east past the Bulloo Overflow and back to The Depot.

Conditions were becoming intolerable. Sturt, Browne and especially Poole were showing signs of scurvy, and the heat was affecting their equipment and supplies: the ink dried on pens as they wrote, lead fell out of pencils, and their flour dehydrated and lost a good deal of its weight.

The decision was made to build an underground room in the side of the creek, roofing it with logs and turf. It gave some respite from the heat, especially for Poole who was becoming increasingly ill. The supplies were dwindling, as was water in the creek.

By May, Sturt started making plans to send Poole home with some of the men as soon as the rain came. A special wagon was to be prepared with a sheepskin-covered cot to provide some comfort for his ailing friend.

At some point Poole made the suggestion that the men could be kept busy if they built a cairn on top Red Hill (Mt. Poole), and so they constructed a pyramid of local silcrete measuring 6.4 metres at the base, and standing 5.5 metres high. It was also intended as a triangulation point

Sturt later lamented, *"I little thought that I was erecting Mr. Poole's monument, but so it was; that rude structure overlooks his lonely grave, and will stand for ages as a record of all we suffered in the dreary region to which we were so long confined"*.

By June Sturt was extremely anxious but believed that the drought could not last much longer. He sought the advice of an elderly Aboriginal man who visited the waterhole and recognising the significance of the boat, gestured to the north, giving Sturt some hope.

In anticipation of the break in the season he sent Stuart to chain a route towards Lake Pinnaroo. Provisions were divided and all the carts were put into serviceable condition.

Beginning on 12th July two days of continuous rain began. This was the time they had waited for. The men were organised and the return party, with Piesse in charge, were set for departure on the 14th. Poole's spirits had lifted.

Sturt and his party set off toward Lake Pinnaroo, but at the end of the first day they were overtaken by one of the men travelling with Piesse who reported that Poole had died.

Poole's body was brought back to The Depot for burial on July 17th, close to a grevillea tree near the underground room. In the bark was carved "J.P.1845"

On July 18th Sturt resumed the passage toward Lake Pinnaroo.

Lake Pinnaroo and Beyond

The passage to Lake Pinnaroo was steady as the men continued to chain the route. After almost 100 km they reached their destination on July 29th. A new base camp to be known as Fort Grey was established.

A survey team continued chaining toward Lake Torrens, joined by Sturt, Browne and Stuart. This was the first time Sturt had encountered the towering sand hills which he described as being *"like crossing the tops of houses in some street"*.

They crossed the Strzelecki Creek and reached Lake Blanche. In the distance they could see the Flinders Ranges and Eyre's Mount Hopeless.

For Sturt it was also hopeless, and they returned to Lake Pinnaroo on August 9th.

With some urgency Sturt now focused on his main objective, to head to the north-west and reach the centre of Australia. On August 14th 1845 Sturt, Browne, Flood, Lewis and Cowley set out with fifteen weeks' provisions, horses and a cart.

Before leaving, Sturt requested that those remaining build a stockade in which to protect all of the arms and ammunitions, as well as a stock yard. The men were to paint the boat in case it was needed and plant the seeds of pumpkin and melon seeds that they carried with them.

On August 22nd, heading just a little west of north, Sturt crossed the Strzelecki Creek and dug holes in its bed for seepage water, in preparation for the trip back. These holes would save their lives on their return.

They crossed the channels of Cooper Creek and speculated that towering cloud to the north may have been over inland waters.

On August 24th they reached a thirty kilometre wall of sand beyond which were the gibbers of the Stony Desert. Eighty kilometres further on Sturt finally began to doubt the possibility of an inland sea.

But, he was not giving up yet. They reached the Diamantina Basin and the lower end of Goyder's Lagoon, followed by more enormous sand ridges.

Challenged by the effort of crossing the sand ridges they followed the swales between them, finding pools of water as they went. Finally the men reach Eyre Creek. It was September 4th.

With sheer grit and determination still they kept on, travelling slightly north-westerly, until they came to the edge of the Simpson Desert. In almost all directions were great waves of red sand ridges covered in spinifex.

Seemingly now defeated, on September 7th 1845, Sturt made the decision to turn back towards Eyre Creek. *"I turned with a feeling of bitter disappointment"*.

Yet, Sturt was not prepared to give up. After resting for few days at Eyre Creek, they followed the creek in differing directions until finally on September 14th they turned toward Fort Grey, staggering into their old camp on October 1st.

On October 9th Sturt rode out of Fort Grey again, taking Stuart, Morgan and Mack with him. This time they carried ten week's supplies.

The men reached the Strzelecki Creek on October 11th and found that it still contained water. Further along to the east, on the 13th, they came to Cooper Creek, a beautiful wide gum-lined creek with plenty water and feed for the horses.

Sturt was in a quandary. He thought about following the creek further east but ideologically he was committed to take a north-bound route away from the creek.

On the morning of October 14th they did so. Within days they were crossing the steep, familiar sand dunes and by the 19th again faced the Stony Desert. From the peaks of the hills they could see more ridges of sand.

In burning heat, Sturt had critical decisions to make, yet he agonised over which way to go, where might they find water. In the end they retreated toward Cooper Creek.

On October 21st the withdrawal began. Sturt described it as a journey through hell. The heat was relentless so they travelled by night. Waterholes were dry or foul. The horses were struggling; two collapsed and were left where they went down.

At midnight on the 28th they reached Cooper's Creek. One of the horses made it to the creek alone and the men took water back to the other, Traveller. He didn't make it.

Sturt still felt compelled to survey the Cooper's Creek upstream. They lightened the loads of the horses by removing provisions and followed along the creek. On the third day they met a large group of Aborigines and, although they gestured to Sturt that no water lay ahead, Sturt persisted until all that they could see ahead were endless plains across which no horse could walk.

On November 1st Sturt realised that they could not go on. One of the horses, The Roan, was crippled and had to be left on Cooper's Creek. Many years later he was seen wandering through the area.

They turned back down Cooper's Creek, bound for the Strzelecki and Lake Pinnaroo. The date was November 6th. On that same day, Browne had made the decision to return to The Depot. The water supply at Lake Pinnaroo was foul and the men were becoming ill. They also had no option but to retreat. He wrote a note for Sturt, placed it in a bottle and buried it beneath a tree alongside the lake.

After leaving Cooper's Creek the final stretch of the retreat was agony. Waterholes in the Strzelecki were muddy and almost dry. The men dug a sump to drain the last of the water. Hot winds drove the temperature to about 52 degrees C before Sturt's thermometer burst. One of the horses, Sturt's favourite, Bawley, collapsed and had to be left. Sturt and Stuart decided to ride ahead to Lake Pinnaroo and take water back to the horse on a cart.

Sturt and Stuart rode into Fort Grey on November 13th and found it deserted. Mack and Morgan staggered in later that night. There was a little foul water in a trench that the horses were able to drink, and a bottle to fill which Mack took back to Bawley the following day but he was beyond recovery.

The evening of their return Sturt and his party had been able to drink some boiled water and make damper. Sturt became violently ill after eating some discarded bacon pieces, but he was determined to keep going back to The Depot.

On November 17th Sturt and Stuart, emaciated and on skeletal horses, rode ahead and reached The Depot. Mack and Morgan were following with the packhorses. Everyone at The Depot were much surprised and overjoyed to see Sturt again.

Flood was immediately sent back with water to help Mack and Morgan.

Finally Sturt was able to rest in a tent with Browne closely observing, but it was clear that he was suffering severe scurvy.

The retreat.

In the midst of the drought the expedition needed to withdraw immediately or risk not surviving at all. Despite being very ill Sturt acted decisively. Flood was sent to Burr Creek to look for water but returned with bad news. He was despatched to the east on November 21st but did not find any water in that direction either.

In desperation Browne came up with a plan to carry water part way to Flood's Creek in a bladder made of bullock skin. On November 27th a wagon was fitted with the bladder, filled with water and taken 50 km down the route. Browne and Flood followed on the 28th, refilled

their supplies from the wagon, and rode on to Flood's Creek. There was only a week's supply of water left in the waterhole.

When they returned, three more bullocks were killed and the skins made into water bladders. They were loaded onto the wagons and filled. It would be barely enough to sustain them for the journey ahead.

In a final act of acknowledging that the attempt to find a large body of water in Central Australia had been futile, the boat was launched into the last of the water in the gorge.

On the evening of December 7th they set out. Sturt was still too ill to ride and was instead carried in a cot on a cart. A cooling breeze helped progress but when Sturt inspected the bladders the following morning he found one leaking. He offered the rest of the water in the bladder to the bullocks but they refused to drink it.

The next day Sturt pushed on relentlessly to the Packsaddle Creek. Here, what had previously been a lake, was completely dry but grasses around the edge were dampened with a little rain and were readily eaten by the horses and bullocks. The bullock-bladder water was again offered, this time in buckets of sand to reduce the tainting.

On the 9th the odd rain shower and Browne's navigation enabled them to pass beyond the Packsaddle Creek area and avoid the dreaded pine forest. Along the way they found shallow pools left by the rain.

Travelling mostly at night they finally reached Flood's Creek. Whilst some of the group rested for a day or so, Browne and Flood went ahead looking for more water. On December 12th they were again on the move, creek to creek, waterhole to waterhole, until they reached Campbell's Creek on December 14th.

Along the way Browne had seen local Aboriginal people eating the berries of a small shrub. After picking some he gave them to Sturt, hoping that they might help improve his health.

Late on December 15th the climb over the Barrier Ranges began. Sturt remained immobile in his stretcher as the wagons and carts groaned as they climbed over the steep rock faces.

Flood again went ahead to find water but returned to report that there was only a limited supply of poor quality on the east side of the ranges. This news made Sturt determined to push through to Cawndilla, where he hoped Piesse might be waiting.

After completing the hills crossing they rested at a waterhole for just a day before they began the final difficult leg to Cawndilla.

On December 20th Browne and McDouall Stuart rode ahead, and found a note from Piesse nailed to a tree. He wrote that he had left a barrel of water a little further on. The water was enough to refresh them all, and they then made the last dash to Cawndilla.

The following morning, they all moved on toward the Darling River.
The final leg

As they would soon discover, the Darling River had stopped flowing due to the drought and was only a series of shallow ponds. Lake Cawndilla was parched, and the Williorara Creek was dry other than the dregs of water in deep channels. The cattle, when unyoked, rushed into the creek and drank from the sludge. The banks, however, were green with grasses for the livestock.

They set up camp on the creek. Browne and Stuart rode ahead and found Piesse further along whereupon they all returned to Sturt. Piesse carried bags of mail for the men, news about family and the colony. He also had news that the shepherd Brock's son had died. Brock was devastated.

On December 21st Sturt felt well enough to move on to Piesse's camp on the river. Here they met old Boocolo of Lake Cawndilla who wept to see his friend return. Piesse had built a bough hut and Sturt decided that they should stay there until after Christmas.

Sturt and Browne were becoming stronger; Sturt was able to stand for a short while. Wanting to verify coordinates for his map he sent McDouall Stuart and Browne back to Scopes Range where on December 24th they marked a tree "*C.A.E., Dec.24, 1845*".

Christmas Day 1845 was a much happier affair than the previous year at Morphett's Creek. The men were given extra sugar and tea, and even some rum from Browne's private store. Yet there was unhappiness in the camp. Old rivalries and jealousies flared between Brock and Piesse with Mack, even Flood, also being caught up in the bitterness. These rivalries would continue until they reached Adelaide.

Moving along the river Sturt again followed the anabranch of the Darling toward the Murray, cutting off considerable distance. On January 6th 1846 Browne and Cowley left the party to travel ahead to Adelaide.

On January 8th the remaining group reach Lake Victoria. Here they learned from local Aboriginal groups that old Nadbuck had been speared, but survived. Sturt was keen to see him again and after a day or two wait he and Camboli appeared. They were thrilled to see Sturt again. Nadbuck proudly showed Sturt the scars from his spearing.

January 13th arrived and Sturt and McDouall Stuart went ahead of the main party, leaving Piesse in charge. They reach Moorundie on the 15th and on January 19th 1846, Sturt, determined to ride his own horse into Adelaide, arrived back at his home at midnight.

The rest of the party reached Adelaide a few days later.