EXPLORING AUSTRALIA BY LAND Hughes

Exploring Australia By Land

by Wade Hughes
Illustrated by Matthew Ottley

Discovery and Exploration Series

Exploring Australia By Land

- rainforest
- open forest
- brigalow forest
- woodland
- arid woodland
- mallee scrub
- mulga scrub
- spinifex country
- other

Fort Dundas
Port Essington
Shelburne Bay
Weymouth Bay
CAPE YORK PENINSULA
Kimberley
Glenelg R.
Ord R.
Victoria R.
TELEGRAPH LINE
Rockingham Bay
Burdekin R.
BOWEN
Sutton R.
Mackenzie R.
Port Curtis
De Grey R.
Fortescue R.
Hammersley Ranges
Ashburton R.
Oakover R.
Gibson Desert
Central Mount Stuart
ALICE SPRINGS
Barcoo R.
Mt. Olga
Ayers Rock
Bernier Is.
Shark Bay
Steep Point
Gascoyne R.
Murchison R.
Gantheaume Bay
Irwin R.
Nullarbor Plain
Shurts Stony Desert
Coopers Ck.
Lake Eyre
Mt. Hopeless
Fort Grey
Maranoa R.
Condamine R.
Brisbane R.
Darling Downs
Moreton Bay
BRISBANE
Lake Torrens
Flinders Ranges
Broken Hill
Darling R.
Port Macquarie
Streaky Bay
Port Augusta
Darling Range
Swan R.
Avon Valley
PERTH
GREAT AUSTRALIAN BIGHT
Murray R.
Lachlan R.
Murrumbidgee R.
Parramatta
Broken Bay
SYDNEY
Yass
Port Lincoln
Spencers Gulf
Lake Alexandrina
ADELAIDE
Margaret River
King George Sound
Grampian Mt's
Goulburn R.
Ovens R.
Glenelg R.
MELBOURNE
Gippsland
Geelong
Portland Bay
Cape Otway
Port Phillip Bay
Western Port Bay
Wilsons Promontory
Macquarie Harbour
Franklin R.
Derwent R.
HOBART

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For Moccasin, who preferred the comfort of an armchair to exploring anywhere beyond the front gate.

WADE HUGHES is a Perth author, a regular contributor to national magazines, and video producer, with a special interest in explorers. He worked for many years as a woolclasser and a photographer, travelling widely on the coast, in the outback and on overseas assignments. Work and curiosity have led him on many personal investigations to important sites in the history of exploration.

MATTHEW OTTLEY comes from a family of explorers in the New Guinea highlands. He has studied art and Aboriginal culture, and worked as a stockman in Queensland. He is an orchestral composer drawing largely on themes from Australian history. As well as being a specialist illustrator of prehistoric life he writes and illustrates children's books, including *Albert's Rainy Day*, soon to be released.

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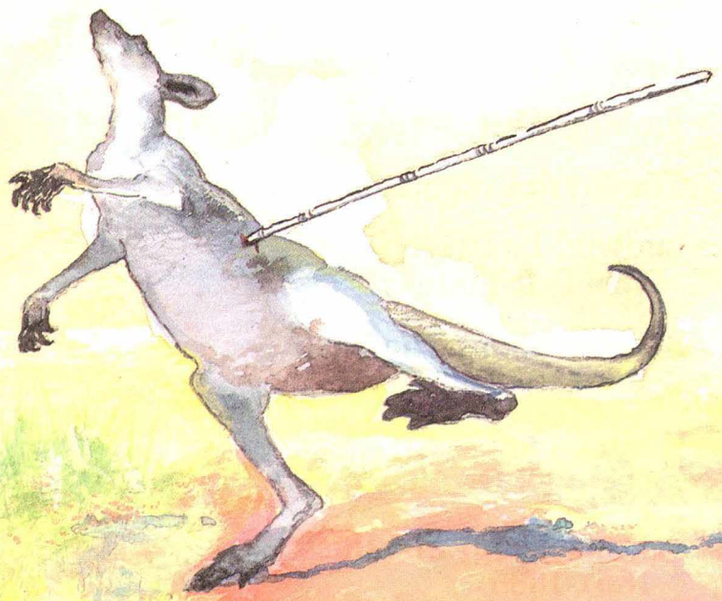
Prelude

A kangaroo. Alert. Twitching whiskers. Wet nose testing the air. Strange scent. Danger?
Faint breeze rippling the grass. Blood red sun peeping over the horizon.
Parrots in the trees.
But that strange scent.....



No danger in sight. Another mouthful of dewy grass. The last mouthful of grass the kangaroo would ever taste.
As the roo stooped to eat, dark eyes rose from the grass-tops. An ebony arm swung back then whipped forward. Three metres of death hissed through the air.
Pinned through the shoulders and the heart, the kangaroo flopped soundlessly to the ground. Two feeble kicks from once powerful legs. Then stillness.

AAAIYAAAH! A shout of triumph rang out across the plain. Three naked boys sprang to their feet and sprinted across to the kill. Startled kangaroos frantically scattered and fled for the bush. Raucous parrots flapped up into the early morning sky. Then peace.

Gngara was pleased. A fine young kangaroo. He knew he'd find one here — it was one of his favourite hunting grounds.

He'd been told about this place when he was a boy.

Go to the little clearing. Past the round grey rocks. Over the dry creek. Creep through the bush until you reach the edge of the plain. Be there as the sun is rising. They'll be there. They always are.

There were many places like this. Places where Gngara knew he would find food for himself and his family. Gngara and his people depended on their knowledge of their lands for their survival. If they didn't know where and how to find food they would starve. They had no books; they couldn't write their knowledge down. So they passed it on by word of mouth from generation to generation. Where to find water. When to gather ripe fruits and seeds. How to track animals.

Old hunters like Gngara explained their methods to the youngsters and then took them out on hunts to show them where to find game and how to catch it. The Aborigines explored the land so they could survive on it. When Europeans arrived they found they had to do the same.

At first they explored simply for survival. They had to find land that could be used to grow food. Once they'd established a secure, home-grown food supply, they could afford to explore for profit. In this way new land was opened up by commercial wool growers, meat producers, cereal farmers, loggers, prospectors and miners.

When Gngara's children went...*to the little clearing, past the round grey rocks, over the dry creek*, they found their way barred by a fence. Cropping grass beyond the fence were sheep and cattle. Spearing *those* brought swift and often violent punishment from the new, European landowners.
Times had changed.

We'll Not Stay In Botany Bay

Governor Arthur Phillip scratched his head. He had a problem. He'd been sent to Australia in command of the First Fleet with orders to establish an English colony at Botany Bay.

So here he was. Perched on the very edge of a new land. But what a land! Judging by the enthusiasm in England he had thought that Botany Bay would be a garden of Eden — a snug harbour, enclosed by land capable of growing all the food his infant colony needed. He was wrong. To begin with, Botany Bay didn't offer a very good anchorage for his fleet. And, even worse, the soil around the bay didn't appear to be fertile at all. It was just black sand.

Phillip decided almost immediately that he, and his people, couldn't stay at Botany Bay — and that was his problem. Where could they go? They couldn't sail back to England and say *Sorry! We couldn't grow any food there, so we've come home again.*Better land had to be found somewhere in New South Wales. What Governor Phillip needed immediately was an explorer. He cast his eyes over his fleet of ships and wondered about the people he'd been given to build the colony with. They were a mixture of free people and convicts. Were there any explorers amongst them?

Let's see. There's soldiers and sailors. Some officials who've never been away from England before. A few semi-skilled farmers. A few bush carpenters. Blacksmiths. Shepherds. Forgers. Horsethieves. Pickpockets. Prostitutes. But no qualified explorers. Great. Just Great! So Governor Phillip took on the job himself. He became the first Australian based, European explorer. He set out in a small boat to look for a safer harbour and better land. He found both at Port Jackson. That was in January, 1788.

In April he was off again, this time inland. He led an expedition heading for the mountains that could be seen, stark and blue, about sixty five kilometres to the west. A boat took them as far west as it could go in Port Jackson and set them down on the north shore. Within minutes they were out of sight, enclosed in thick, rain-washed bush. Phillip had pains in his side and stomach but he pressed on. Creeks and gullies. Sodden clothes. Tangled scrub. Scratches and cuts. Rocky cliffs. Bruised shins. Pelting rain. Wild windy weather. Bush-bashing for five hard days. That left Phillip short of food so he gave up and turned back.

He hadn't reached the foot of the mountains but he had passed over some reasonable land and he marked it for an extension of the settlement. It was called Rose Hill. Today it's Parramatta.

Arthur Phillip was the first to find out, at first hand, just how hard it was going to be to crack the secrets of Australia's interior. They had to be cracked though and Phillip kept trying.

In 1789 he led three expeditions to Broken Bay. On foot and by boat Phillip and his men peeped round headlands and peered down creeks. Searching for farmable land. Hoping to find a way through the barrier of the Blue Mountains.

Eventually they discovered and explored the Hawkesbury River. Here was a chance! They followed the Hawkesbury for about a hundred kilometres — until they could take the boats no further. Then they pressed on on foot.

The expeditions did find some good land, but the colony was still inescapably jammed between the sea and the barrier of the Blue Mountains. Revealing what lay beyond those mountains was no easy task. They are part of the rocky spine of Australia, the Great Dividing Range, which runs from northern Queensland to Victoria.

As Australia's first explorer, Governor Phillip set a good example. He showed what qualities a man needed if he wanted to call himself an explorer in this new land. And he was brave. A misunderstanding with a large group of Aborigines left him fighting for his life with a spear through his shoulder. Phillip ran for his boat, supporting the wobbling spear with his hands until it bowed down and struck the ground in front of him. Agony!

Spears were flying in a lethal hissing hail but he could go no further. Phillip called for Lieutenant Henry Waterhouse. *For God's sake, haul this spear out!* Imagine the torture! Three metres of barbed spear hanging and dragging from a ragged wound in the shoulder. Waterhouse realised that he couldn't pull the spear out — the savage barbs made it impossible — so he tried to snap it off.

Aborigines' spears do not snap easily. They're hardened and toughened in fire. Waterhouse strained and twisted. Phillip stood his ground.

Then the Aborigines gave Waterhouse added strength. "...another spear came and just grazed the skin off between the thumb and forefinger of my right hand. I must own it frightened me a good deal and I believe added to my exertions; for the next sudden jerk I gave it it broke..."

All this because Phillip had tried to shake hands with an Aborigine. The gesture had been mistaken for a threat. Phillip had been lucky to survive — but he had formed a mould for future Australian explorers. Whatever their reasons for setting out Phillip had shown that they had to be bold, resourceful and determined. With these qualities they might succeed. Without them they would surely perish.

The Tramp Of English Feet

Silent night. Stone-cracking cold. Captain Watkin Tench and his five companions were out in the bush, cooking themselves a crow on the fire. Stinging smoke wafted over them and, one by one they rubbed their eyes. *If only that was an emu and not a crow.* After a day's hard hiking they all had robust appetites. Tench gave the bird a couple more turns then decided it was done. Now came the difficult part. How *do* you divide a shrivelled crow into six equal serves?

They'd set out, in June 1789, from the new settlement at Rose Hill and struck westwards, towards the Blue Mountains. It wasn't a major expedition though. They weren't equipped for a long haul. When they came to a hill eight kilometres from Rose Hill they climbed it for a better view. Between them and the frowning mountains lay a "wild abyss, ... trackless, ... in awful silence". Pushing on due west through that country was futile. They turned northwest. It looked as though there might be a river off in that direction. They tramped till nearly dark and camped for the night near a small pool of water. That's where they cooked the crow.

Next morning they discovered the Nepean River and more useable land.

Tench's discovery had to be followed up. Governor Phillip called in Lieutenant Dawes.

Cross the Nepean and penetrate the ranges beyond it.

A shallow ford let them cross the river. So far so good. Now for the mountains. No way! In three days, climbing, hacking, detouring, sweating, swearing, they gained twenty four kilometres. Tired, sore and disappointed, they turned back.

Captain William Paterson's expedition set off in 1793. Six weeks provisions were crammed into the boats. Five waterfalls in the space of sixteen kilometres slowed, then stopped him.

Henry Hacking had a go in 1794. His group reached the mountains and clawed up and over dozens of rocky ridges. That was hard work. *Just one...more ridge lads..then we'll see..what's beyond..this mountain!*

They climbed that ridge and saw what was beyond it. More

Over The Hill

Life as a convict in the new colony was not much fun. Hard work. Poor food. Strict rules. Brutal punishment for breaking them.

When Thomas Martin stole a pair of trousers he paid for them with a flogging. Two hundred lashes. Mary and William Thompson were found drunk in their hut. They probably would have got away with it but they made too much noise. Then they abused the soldiers who came to arrest them. Thirty lashes for William; twenty five for Mary. Eighteen year old John Bennet was hanged for stealing bread and sugar.

So there was plenty of incentive to escape. Many tried. But Port Jackson didn't let go easily. Hard, hungry bush. Rugged country. Hostile Aborigines. Nowhere to escape to. Those conditions held convicts more securely than any prison bars.

The convicts who did slip away unnoticed were usually recaptured. Some starved to death. Others were killed by Aborigines. And some simply disappeared without trace.

'arry and Ned 'ave been gone a week now. They might 'ave got away wiv it.

— Aye. 'arry said they was goin' to 'ead for China.

China?. 'ows's 'e goin to get to China for gorsake!

— Dunno, but 'arry said it was just over them hills, to the north.

China'd be better than this place, wouldn' it?

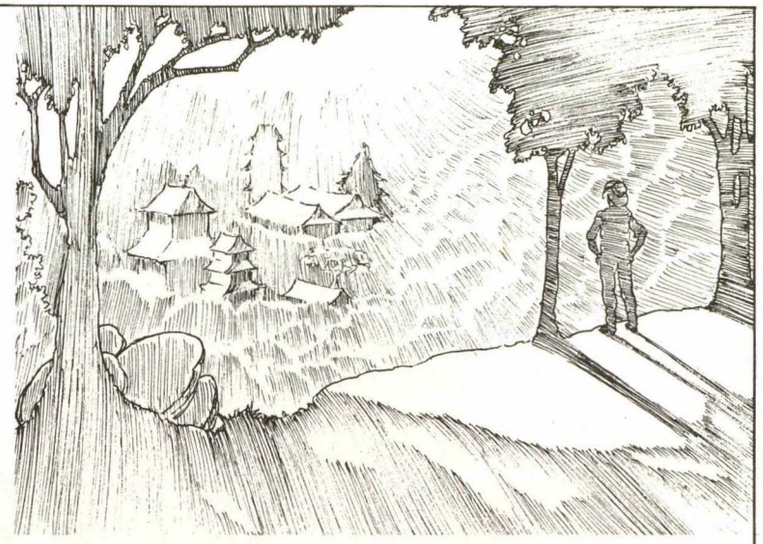
— D'yer want to go and see? Next full moon, eh?

— Right!

Some of the convicts really did believe that China was just over the hill — although they never met anybody who had actually been there. It seemed a reasonable way to explain the disappearance of escapees who were never found. After all, everybody knew that China was far, far away from England. Well, hadn't they now sailed a long, long, way from England? China must be close!

One China-bound group set off from the colony in 1791. They made it as far as Broken Bay but then the Aborigines attacked them. Months of poor diet in the colony had weakened them. The hike to Broken Bay had exhausted them. Now the Aborigines wanted to kill them. *Let's go back and wait for someone else to find an easier way to China.*

— Right!



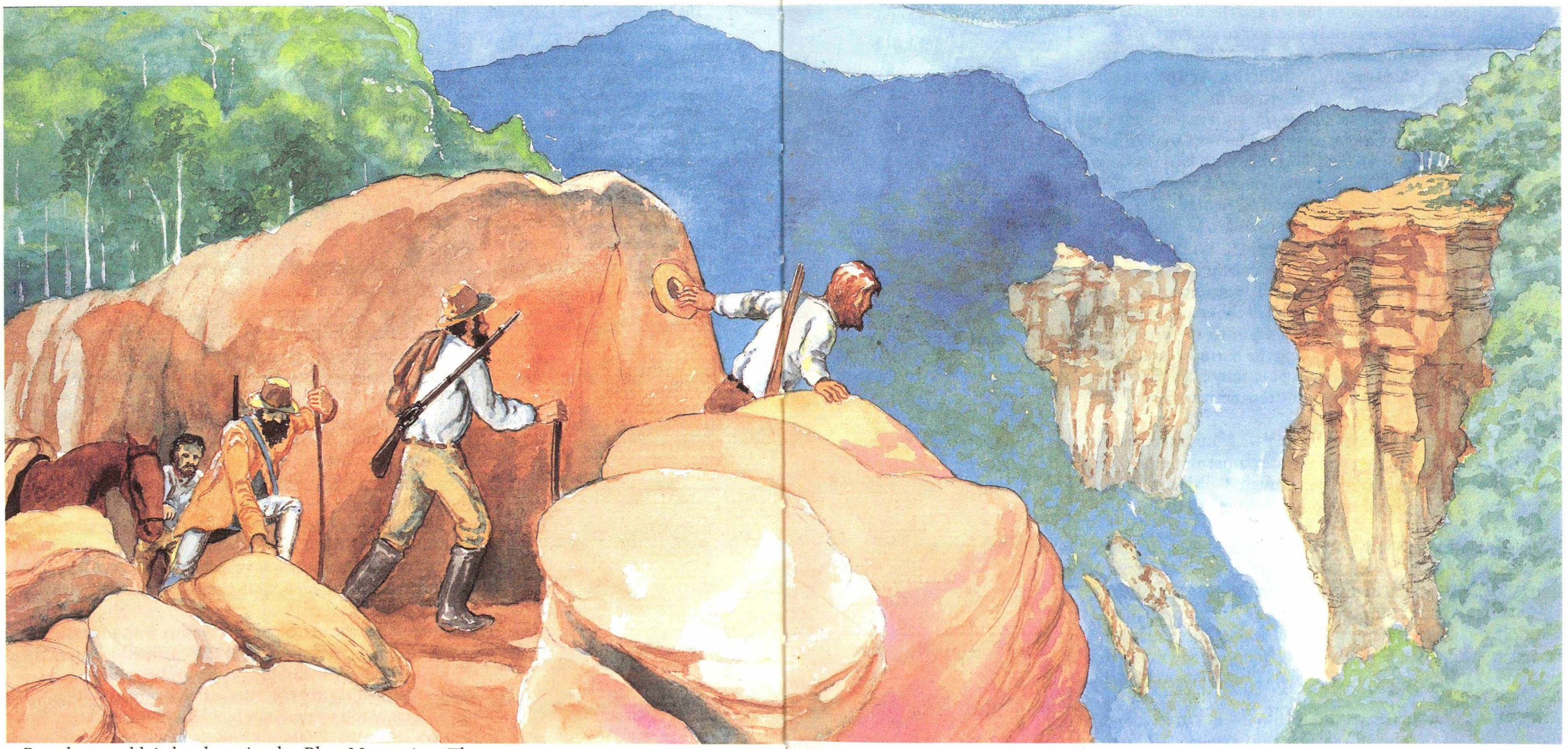
mountains. As far as the eye could see. Separated by steep, deeply gashed ravines. Choked with scrub. Too much. It couldn't be done. They turned back.

Freed convict, Matthew Everingham and two companions almost made it in 1795. But they were turned back by a shortage of food.

George Bass, the sea explorer, couldn't wait to test himself against the Blue Mountains. He took a small group of men, equipped them with climbing ropes and grappling irons and strode confidently to the base of the mountains. It took fifteen days of toil to convince him that he wasn't going to get through. *Hmmm. Exploring the coast by boat might be a better idea after all!*

Ensign Barraillier tried bullocks to carry his stores. Bullocks climbing mountains? The Blue Mountains shrugged their sandstone shoulders and Barraillier was forced back. So was the naturalist George Cayley. He tried using horses.

Why should one range of mountains be so difficult to cross? Long before anybody had heard of the Blue Mountains people had crossed all the sky-scraping mountains of Europe. Usually it was a matter of following the river valleys as they wound their way between the peaks.



But that couldn't be done in the Blue Mountains. The valleys criss-crossed the mountains. They were clogged with thick and inpenetrable scrub. And they usually ended in a precipice. Climb that one and there was another waiting just over the ridge. Climb that. There was another. And another. And another. Not even the fittest, most determined explorers could cross the mountains that way.

Meanwhile in 1797 Lieutenant Shortland eased the land shortage slightly. He sailed north in search of convicts who had escaped in a stolen ship. He found the Hunter River and the fertile land of the Hunter Valley became known.

Blaxland's Need For Grass

May, 1813. Bone-dry sky. No clouds. No rain. Drought was withering the colony's stockfeed. Since they'd landed in 1788 the colonists had worked hard to build up their flocks and herds of animals. They'd started with a few sheep, cattle, goats and pigs, and steadily the numbers had increased. Now there were more animals than the parched grasses of the colony could feed. More grazing land had to be found, quickly.

Gregory Blaxland needed fresh pastures for his own stock.

Most of the good land between the sea and the mountains had been taken up — there was only one way to go. West.

Blaxland thought there was a good chance he'd find grazing land on the other side of the Blue Mountains. And he was sure he could find a way through. *Climb to the highest ridge and follow it all the way. Forget about the valleys. Stay on the ridge.* William Charles Wentworth and Lieutenant William Lawson offered to go with him. Together with four servants, four pack horses to carry their provisions and five dogs to help catch kangaroos for food, they trooped off in May 1813.

Climbing was hard work. The horses had to be prodded and coaxed up the steep shoulders of the ridge. When the scrub closed in they could only travel in the mornings. Afternoons were spent marking and hacking a path. Next morning they'd move the stores and horses to the end of the track and set up camp. Marking and hacking began again in the afternoon. Metre by metre they advanced along the narrow ridge. It was like travelling along the backbone of a skinny old horse: sheer drops down the ribs of the range only ten metres away to their right and left.

Then they ran into a natural stone wall. Right across the top of the ridge. No way round it. Only a narrow, rock-filled notch offered any chance to pass through. Wooden poles and straining muscles levered and rolled rocks out of the way.*Can we get through now?*

Horses hoofs clattered on the loose stone. Fear made the animals falter. A stinging swipe with a stick sent them struggling through the notch. Time to start hacking again.

Howling, barking dogs woke them one night. In the morning they found tracks of Aborigines close to their camp. Curiosity? An intended attack? No way of knowing. After three weeks they reached their goal. They'd penetrated the Blue Mountains.

". . . forest or grass land, sufficient in extent . . . to support the stock of the Colony for the next thirty years!" At last the secrets of inland New South Wales could be revealed. But just when the colonists thought they had the measure of their new country along came the Riddle of the Rivers!

Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson (portrayed left to right). They found a way through the Blue Mountains by following the ridge tops

2

Hang On, Where's All The Water Going?

"The handsomest country I ever saw. . ." That's how surveyor George Evans described the country opened up by the route pioneered by Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson. Governor Macquarie had sent Evans to follow that route, confirm it and push further west if he could. Evans did all three and he discovered a river. He might have been fishing for promotion when he named the features he discovered. First the Macquarie Plains. Now the Macquarie River. The Governor *would* be pleased. This river was an oddity though. It was flowing north-west. Inland. Not towards the sea on the east coast.

Six months later the steel rimmed wheels of the Governor's carriage rattled and bounced over a road all the way across the Blue Mountains. A hundred and sixty kilometres. Nine days to travel a route that had taken twenty five years to find.

Evans was out in the bush again by this time. He found another river. Just to make sure the Governor wouldn't overlook him he called it the Lachlan. That was the Governor's Christian name.

At the centre of newly settled lands a town emerged. Bathurst, Australia's first inland centre. As the frontier crept out from Bathurst Governor Macquarie began to hear reports of more inland rivers. Even a rumour about a mighty river to the south-west, beyond the Lachlan. All flowing west or north-west.

They were draining the western flanks of the Great Dividing Range. An enormous amount of water was pouring down these rivers. Where was it going? There seemed to be only two choices. Navigators had found no trace of a major river on the west, south or north coasts.

Only a short stretch of coast on the north-west edge of the continent had not been explored properly. These rivers were flowing north-west. All they way to the coast? William Wentworth gave it some thought. He wasn't convinced that it *did* flow all that way. But if it did, what a river it must be!

". . . its course cannot be less than from five to six thousand miles, and the endless accession of tributary streams which it must receive in its passage through so great an extent of country will without doubt enable it to vie in point of magnitude with any river in the world." A mighty river indeed — if it existed. The second choice was the most popular. An inland sea. That should be easy enough to find.

Just pick a river, any western-flowing river, and follow it.

Take the Lachlan! said Macquarie. *Follow it wherever it goes.* John Oxley was chosen to lead the expedition. It was the first major inland expedition in Australia's history. His plan was to load boats with stores and some of the men. He followed the river on horseback with the rest of the men and the fourteen pack horses. They set off in April, 1817.

Progress was slow. Submerged tree trunks made it difficult for the boats. One solid collision caved in the bows of one of them and the men had to beach it for repairs. Oxley looked around and guessed that this country was often flooded.

His suspicions increased when the river rose over a metre overnight although there had been no rain nearby. The extra water had come from heavy rain back in the mountains. A small hill gave him a chance to spy ahead. *Oh! No!*

> . . . the whole country from the west north west round to the north was either a complete marsh or lay under water, and this for a distance of twenty-five or thirty miles, in those directions; to the south and south-west the country appeared more elevated, but low marshy grounds lay between us and it . . .

There was no way to the inland sea in that direction so he retreated to a fork which took the river south-west and followed that. Same result.

Oxley was sure that somewhere on the south coast, between Spencer Gulf and Cape Otway, there *must* be a river flowing into the sea. So he struck out south-west, away from the Lachlan.

If there is a river, this track will cross it. It was a hard track to follow. Bogs and rough stony ground. Exhausted horses. Prickly, tangled scrub. No water. *We can't go any further. Head back for the Lachlan. The horses must have water.* Ahh! So close to solving the riddle of the rivers. A few kilometres and he would have reached the Murrumbidgee. But he turned back and struck north for the Lachlan.

Oxley followed the Lachlan eastwards. Still a long way to go. Plod, plod, plod. Time dragged by. No change in the country. "Nothing can be more melancholy and irksome than travelling over wilds, which nature seems to have condemned to perpetual loneliness and desolation."

They stayed several kilometres out from the river to avoid the softest ground and thickest bush but the horses still had to struggle. Oxley had plenty of time to assess the country. He was sure that flooding "must cause the country to remain for ever uninhabitable, and useless for all the purposes of civilized man." His report landed on Macquarie's desk.

We couldn't get through.
Never mind. Try the Macquarie!

Back to Bathurst. Oxley watched his boats as they drifted out into the muddy current. Oarsmen bent their backs. Ripples spread from dipping blades of the oars. Oxley wrenched his horse's head round and gently spurred it into a walk. It was May 1818. *This time we'll get through to the inland sea.*

Oxley Marshes In

The Macquarie offered a much better chance.

> The river expanded into beautiful reaches, having great depth of water, and from two to three hundred feet broad, literally covered with water fowl of different kinds: the richest flats border the river, apparently more extensive on the south side.

After 200 kilometres of easy travel Oxley decided that it was time to send the Governor a message. Two of the men turned back to deliver it. Poor Oxley. He'd just sent an optimistic message to the Governor. *No worries. This is the river that will take us to the inland sea. It's wide, deep and free of obstacles.*

Scrape! Bonk! Clonk! Glances of anxiety. Submerged tree trunks and branches. The wide deep channel was spreading out over the land. It was no longer a river. Oxley was trapped in marshes again .No clear channel for the boats. No clear track for the horses. *Not again!*

Oxley's determined efforts to find out where the western flowing rivers went were frustrated by the swampy ground he had to cover. On his first expedition in 1817 his horses were worn out by the trying conditions. He had to turn back and just missed out on reaching the Murrumbidgee

Oxley was a brave man though. He knew he couldn't go any further with his horses. So he took four volunteers, a month's provisions and jumped into the biggest boat. The current was still strong so he thought there was a good chance the river would force its way through the marshes and break free again on the other side. *Then we'll see this elusive inland sea.*

They headed off on the steady current. Low branches passing close overhead. Then a rain storm. Collars pulled tight. Water sluicing off hat brims. Soggy trousers and socks. Stores under canvas.

A patch of ground just big enough to light a fire on — if the firewood has stayed dry. *Pull up here.* Keel skidding on the mud. Boat slewing round in the current. Cold, uncomfortable night.

Next morning. Clear sky. Press on. Straight into the reed beds. Millions of slender reeds. Each one easily swept aside. United, an immovable barrier. Oxley had been stopped. He'd discovered the Macquarie Marshes. Struggle back. Against the current. Meet the horses. Head east.

They went a long way east. Over the Castlereagh River. Discovered and crossed the fertile Liverpool Plains; a consolation prize. All the way to the coast. At the coast a new discovery. A snug harbour. Port Macquarie. That should keep the old man happy.

They headed south along the coast, back to Sydney. With no firm proof of an inland sea. But Oxley was convinced that the reed beds were simply the shallow fringe of that sea.

Pastures Further Afield

Grazing land became the foundation for exploration around Bathurst. Grazing land could support livestock. Livestock meant food and wealth in the colony. As soon as new lands were opened up settlers moved in. Settlers themselves became explorers. Walking, wondering, hoping to find better runs, they gathered knowledge of the country.

And then, in 1823, Allan Cunningham reappeared. He was a skilled botanist and a courageous explorer. He'd been on Oxley's Lachlan River expedition. After that journey he'd spent three years exploring and botanising aboard the *Mermaid* with Philip Parker King. Now Cunningham turned his eyes inland again. Those inland plains must contain many new species of plants — and back in England the eager and influential botanist Sir Joseph Banks was calling for as many new species as he could get for his botanical gardens at Kew. Cunningham was a meticulous explorer. His scientific training guaranteed that.

Walk a few kilometres. Stop and measure the altitude with a barometer. Examine the plants. A new species. Pick it. Preserve it. Pack it. Chip off some rock. Record it. Pack it. Move on. *Stop, wait.* Another new plant. Careful, clever, Cunningham; he was one of the most useful explorers to take to the field.

He searched for a way through the Liverpool Range, north of Bathurst. Beyond that range lay the Liverpool Plains. Other explorers had looked for a way through but the range had defeated them. Persistence paid off and Pandora's Pass opened the plains to settlers from Bathurst and the Hunter Valley.

Back in Sydney pressure was on Governor Brisbane to remove hardened criminals from the town. In 1823 the London based Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst decided the colony needed to be turned over to a better class of citizen. So John Oxley was sent to Moreton Bay to find a site for a new convict settlement. He sailed in the *Mermaid* and discovered two stranded convicts, survivors from a shipwreck. They'd spent seven months living with the local Aborigines. And they had an interesting tale to tell. *Down south of the bay there's a big river.*

Oxley followed their lead and discovered the Brisbane River. Another discovery named after a governor. Did these brave explorers have no imagination?

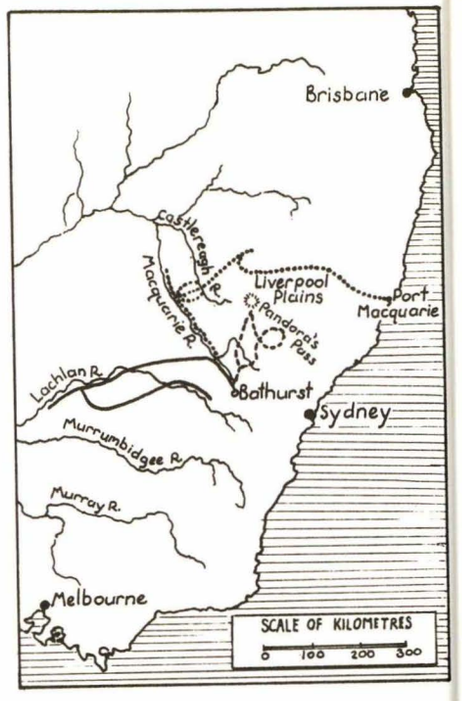
Oxley was now pretty sure that the western flowing inland rivers filled a vast, shallow inland sea, and that the same inland sea fed the east flowing Brisbane River. Some of these discoveries were adding more confusion than they took away! But that didn't halt progress, and settlement at Moreton Bay began in 1824.

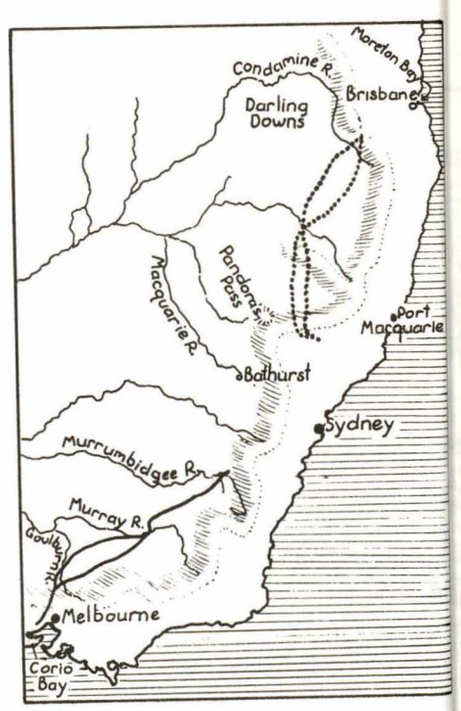
Lord Bathurst had said he wanted Sydney cleared of the worst convicts. Governor Brisbane was struck by an idea that would let him get rid of a few convicts and explore some new country at the same time. *Take a boat load of them south to Wilson's Promontory. Drop them off there and offer them a free pardon and some land if they can find their way back to Sydney.*

Hmmm. It might work — but shouldn't you send an experienced bushman with them?

Yes. Righto. I will. Will you lead them Mr. Hume?

Definitely not! No way!....but I will lead a small expedition of my own choosing. He did too, in October, 1824.





Oxley 1817

Oxley 1818

Cunningham 1823

Cunningham 1827

Hume and Hovell 1824

Great Dividing Range

Fighting Their Way Through

Hamilton Hume was Australia's first Australian born explorer. He'd been out in the bush since he was a teenager, he'd explored with Oxley and he knew what he was doing; except when it came to choosing travelling companions!

Hume was forced to look for someone to share the expenses of the expedition. That's how William Hovell came to be involved. Hovell was eleven years older than Hume. He was a peppery old sea captain, used to having his own way. Hume was fiercely independent and more experienced in the ways of the bush than the ways of the sea. It was inevitable that they should clash.

But they were both determined to get through to the south coast. With six men and horses, bullocks and carts to carry them and their stores, they took to the bush. Wide, deep and angry in flood, the Murrumbidgee was their first obstacle. They waited three days before they tried to cross it.

Hume swam a rope across. Then they knocked the wheels off one of their carts and turned it into a boat. Australia's first amphibious vehicle. Stores were floated across. Men, horses and bullocks swam across. Dry the gear. Head south-west again. Then a mighty river. They'd discovered the Murray — but they called it the Hume. One of them tossed a stone. The opposite bank was quite a bit further than a good stone's throw. *Must be about eighty yards across, Mr. Hovell.*

If you say so, Mr. Hume.

Discovering rivers became a feature of the expedition. The Goulburn, Ovens, Mitta Mitta, Arndell and many others crossed their track. Eventually the bullocks and horses became so used to crossing rivers that they would walk into the water without complaint. But the strain told on the two leaders. Each of them wanted a bigger share of authority than the other. Squabbles and heated arguments broke out nearly every day. Even the breathtaking first sighting of the snow-capped Australian Alps off in the distance didn't cool their tempers for long.

Flies and mosquitos didn't help either. They made sure that the explorers were constantly irritable. Breaking point came in dense, bewildering scrub in the rough mountainous country of the Dividing Range. Which way to go? That was the question. *I think we should go this way Mr. Hume!*

Don't be silly! This is the way to go!

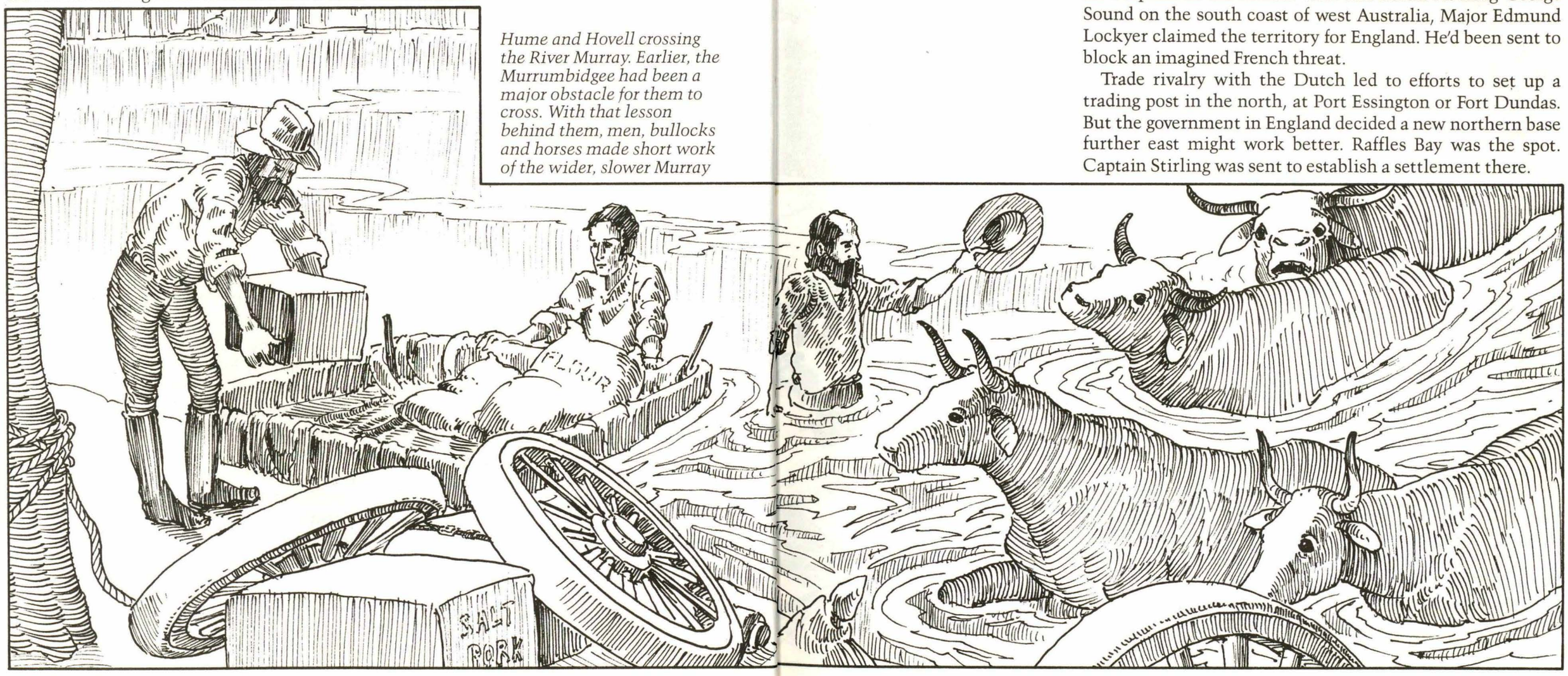
Nonsense! Go that way if you want to but I'm going this *way!* So they split up and headed in different directions. Then they decided that was foolish and joined forces again.

Hume, Hovell and two of the men set off on a scouting mission and fought their way through terrible scrub and hard rocky country. When they came back to the rest of the group after finding a way out of the mountains they were a sorry sight. Hume's face was covered in scratches. Hovell had a black-eye. One of the other men had torn his trousers to shreds. Effects of the bush . . . or another fight?

Later Aborigines set fire to the bush ahead of them. The fires were intended to flush out game for Aboriginal hunters but they also forced Hume and Hovell into long wide detours. Amazingly though, this jealousy-wracked team *did* find its way to the sea.

Aborigines told them they were at a bay called Geelong. Hume and Hovell turned to their navigation instruments, took some readings then scribbled down their calculations.

Hume and Hovell crossing the River Murray. Earlier, the Murrumbidgee had been a major obstacle for them to cross. With that lesson behind them, men, bullocks and horses made short work of the wider, slower Murray

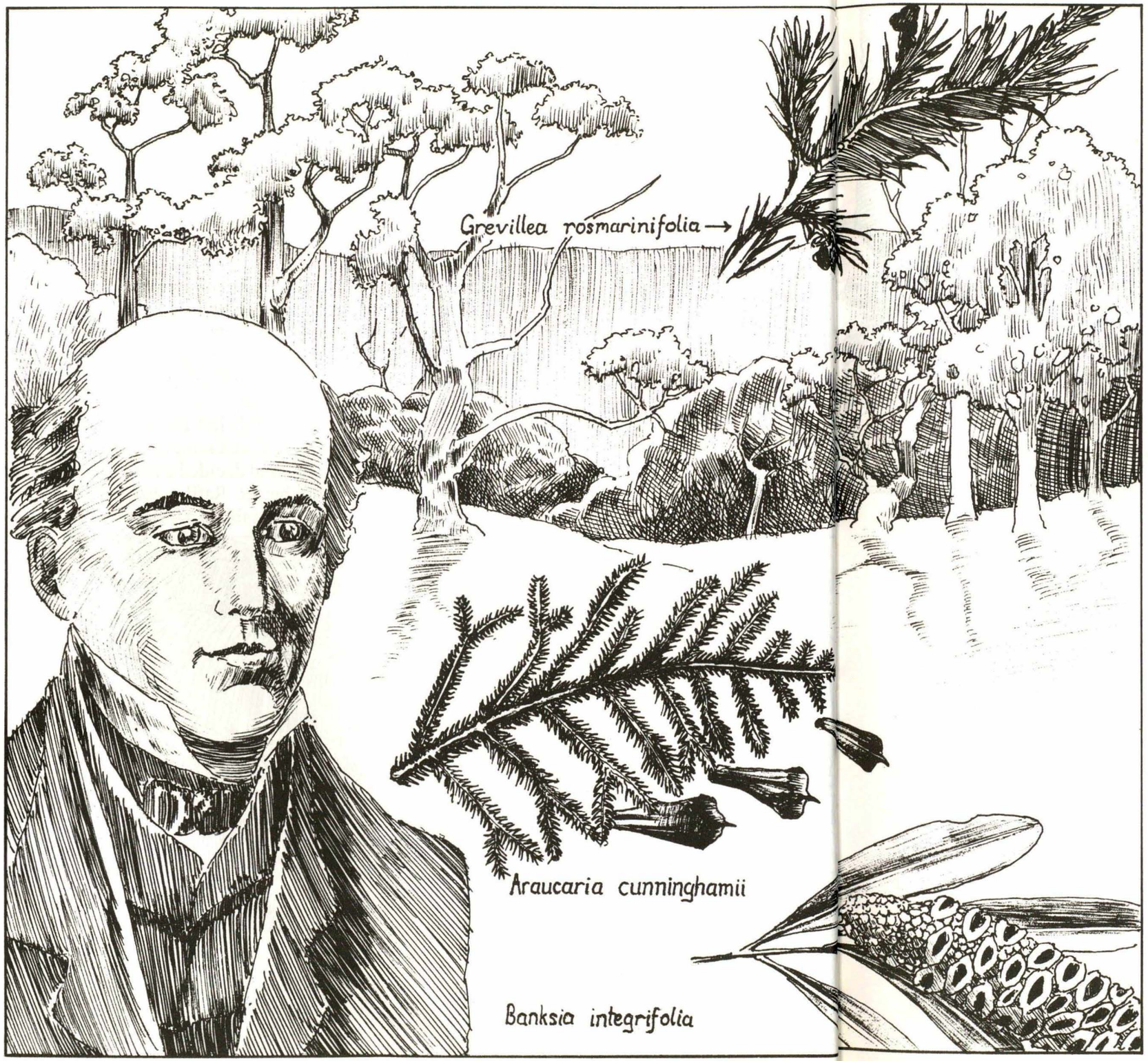


By their reckoning Geelong must be on the western shore of Westernport Bay — but they were wrong. An error of navigation. Geelong is on the western side of Port Phillip Bay. When they returned to Sydney with glowing reports of the land around Westernport the Governor marked it down as the site of a future settlement. In 1826 that settlement was founded. It foundered two years later. The shore of Westernport was said to be totally unfit for settlement.

Hume and Hovell hadn't stopped squabbling and for years after they blamed each other for the navigational blunder that led that settlement to Westernport, instead of the more suitable Port Phillip.

In the 1820s while inland explorers were busy in Australia's south east, the authorities became concerned about the need for outposts in the remote west and north. At King George Sound on the south coast of west Australia, Major Edmund Lockyer claimed the territory for England. He'd been sent to block an imagined French threat.

Trade rivalry with the Dutch led to efforts to set up a trading post in the north, at Port Essington or Fort Dundas. But the government in England decided a new northern base further east might work better. Raffles Bay was the spot. Captain Stirling was sent to establish a settlement there.



Stirling's Silver Tongue

Swan River. Autumn, 1827. Mirror-smooth river. Wide as a lake. Soft grey morning mist. Cool air. Warm sunbeams glinting off the water. Sturdy green forest. Rich green grass. Gentle rocking of the boat as the botanist stepped out onto the river bank. *This soil will grow anything Captain Stirling!*

This was Stirling's promised land, his Garden of Eden. He had a vision — a thriving colony on the west coast of Australia, servicing ships on the England-Port Jackson run. Trading with the markets that rimmed the Indian Ocean. Captain Stirling in command.

In Sydney he'd enthusiastically explained his vision to Governor Darling *That's not a bad idea, Captain Stirling! Look, on your way to Raffles Bay, drop into the Swan River and see if that's suitable for a colony. A colony there could be very useful . . . and it'll be another poke in the eye for those Frenchmen.*

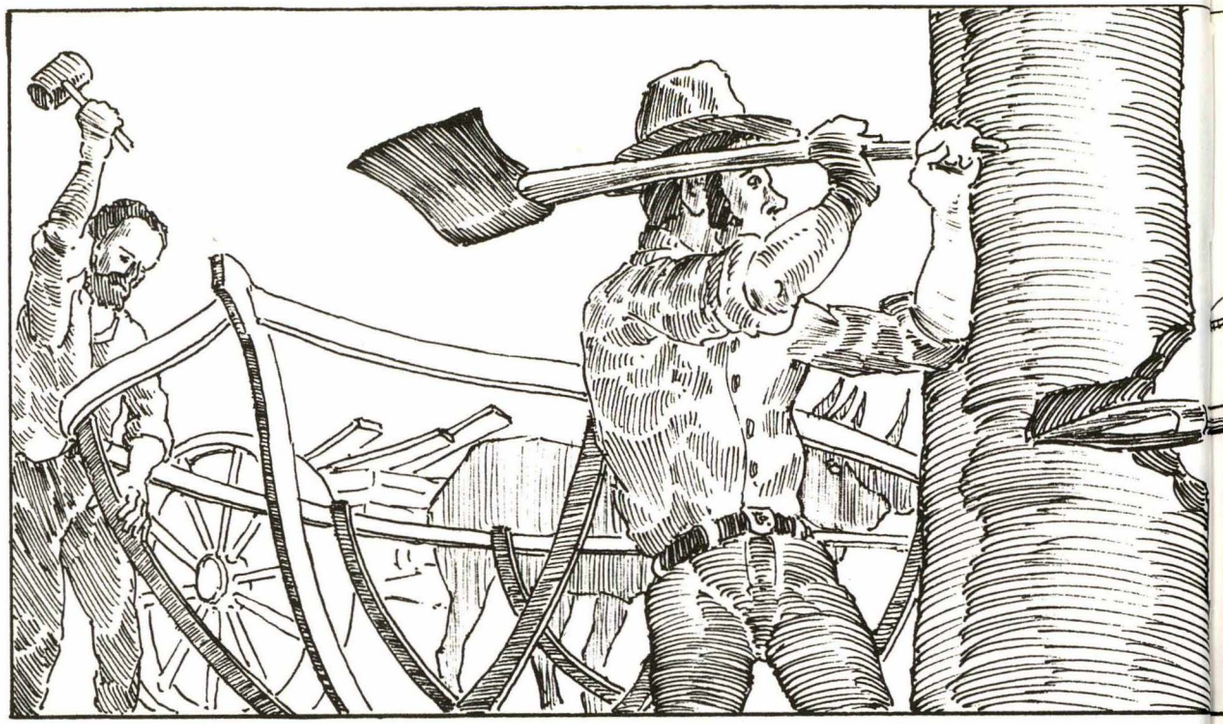
He would have started a settlement right away. But he couldn't. Raffles Bay was waiting for him. *I'll be back here just as soon as I can. Now, before I go . . . those hills in the distance . . . they don't have a name. Something original. Something imaginative. I know . . . The Darling Range!*

Downs, Cunningham, Downs

In 1827 Allan Cunningham was in the field again. This time he ranged far to the north of the Liverpool Plains, noting, measuring, collecting, and discovering. He discovered the Dumaresque, Gwydir and Condamine Rivers and, more importantly, a vast spread of fertile land, the Darling Downs. That would have been enough to secure his reputation — after all he'd named a new land after Governor Darling — but Cunningham wasn't satisfied.

From the edge of the Darling Downs he spied what he thought might be a pass through the mountains to the east. *That should lead to the new settlement at Moreton Bay. It could be called Cunningham's gap.* He marked it down for future exploration. Eventually Allan Cunningham had a chance to round off his work near Moreton Bay. He was sent there, by sea, in 1828. He soon proved himself right. Cunningham's Gap was an easy way through the mountains. Many explorers had been rewarded with generous grants of land. Allan Cunningham, who'd found so much good land, and such a good way to reach it, was given nothing.

Allan Cunningham identified unknown species of plants from many parts of Australia, as well as opening up rich lands to grazing



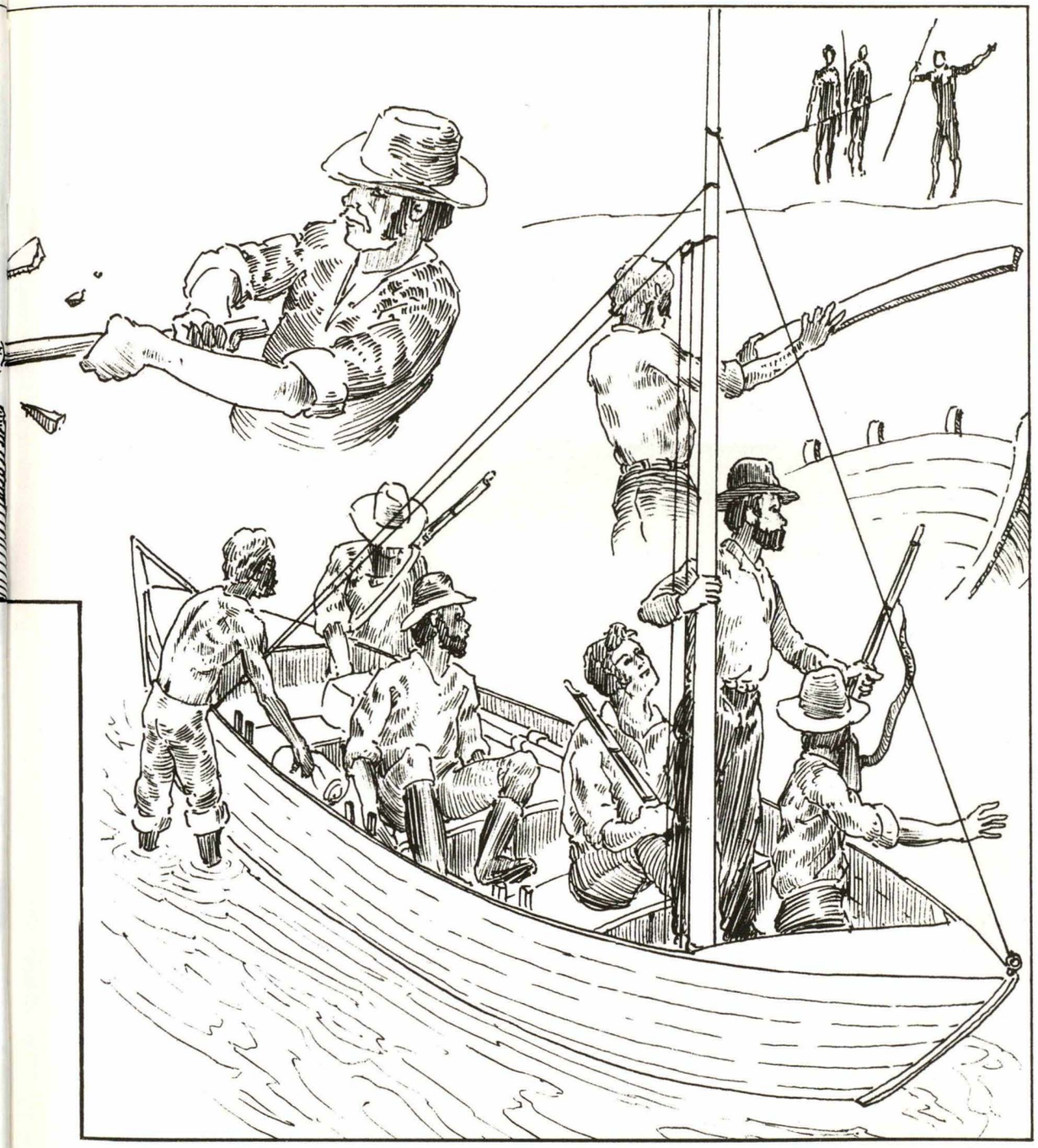
Sturt Thinks and Swims

November, 1828. Danger. Sullen Aborigines. Daubed in red and yellow ochre. Nervously fingering spears. Shuffling feet. Eyes turned towards the ground. Time for decisive action. Charles Sturt took a coldly calculated risk. *Here. Give me one of your spears. I'll give you my gun. We'll compare each other's weapons.*

The Aborigines didn't understand but Sturt rode up and took a spear from the nearest warrior; offered his gun in return. Trust. Peace. Safety. Sturt's men breathed again. A long, long sigh. Later in the afternoon white men and black men swam together in the muddy Macquarie River.

Sturt and his party were tramping down the river. Twelve of them. Sturt, Hamilton Hume, two soldiers and eight convicts. Horses, bullocks and a boat on a carriage. Trying to reach the inland sea by following the winding Macquarie.

It had been hot. Very hot. The whole country was in the red-hot grip of drought. "The thermometer was seldom under 114°F at noon, and rose still higher at 2 pm." Every drop of moisture had been burned out of the ground, "the plains over which we journeyed had large fissures traversing them, so



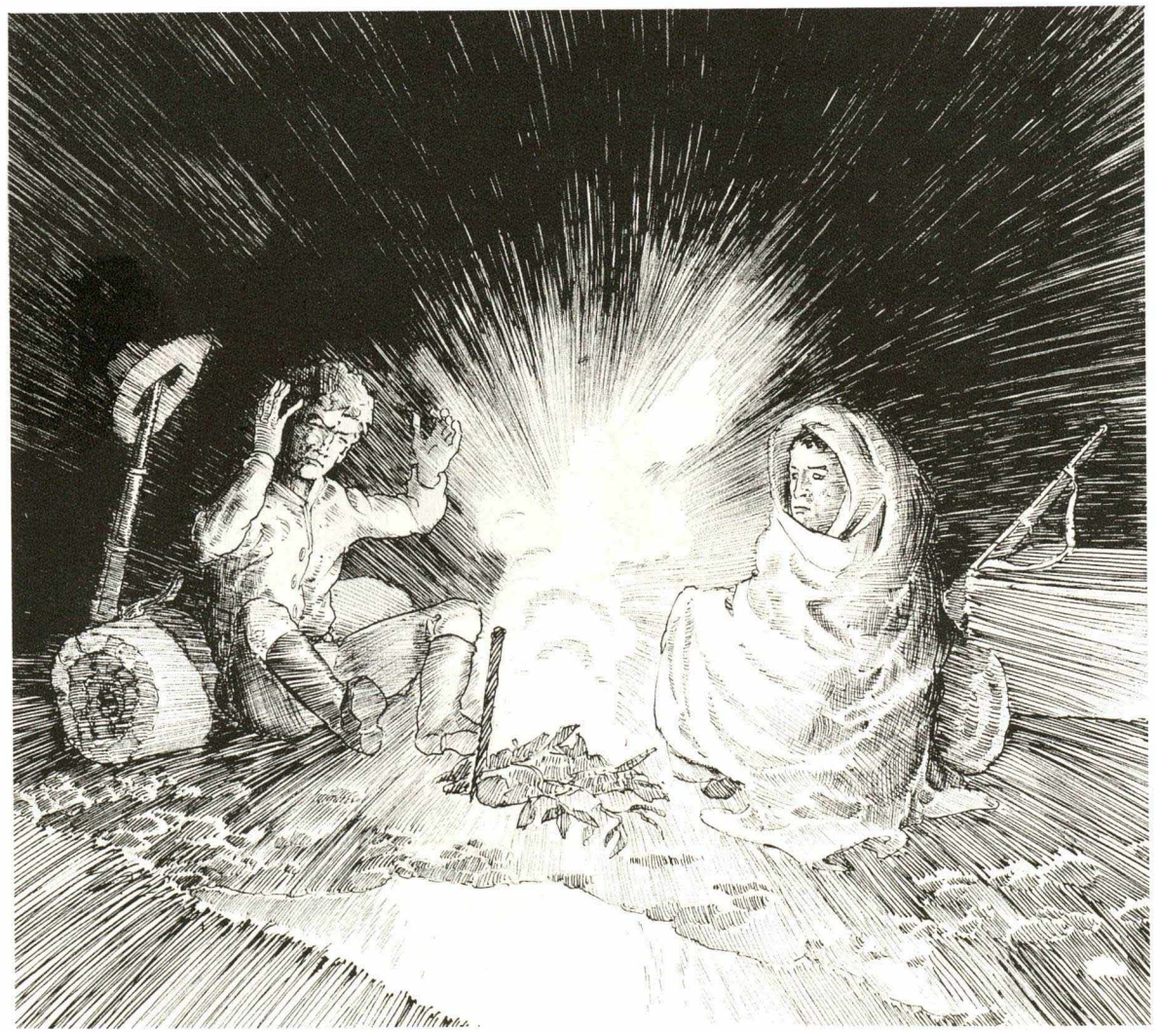
On his second expedition Sturt tried to follow the Murrumbidgee but his party was slowed down by the soft ground and high reeds. So they assembled a boat which they'd brought along in kit form, and built another from local timber

that the earth may literally be said to have gasped for moisture." Heat. Dust. Flies. Blinding spears of sunlight. No sunglasses. Eyes cramped in constant squints. Only a trickle of water in the bed of the Macquarie. Barely enough to keep it flowing. Ideal conditions for his purpose!

He was following in Oxley's tracks. Wide sheets of water, swamps, and tangled reed beds had stopped Oxley. There was no chance of being stopped by water this time. Sturt was going to push right through the shrivelled and cracked reedbeds of the Macquarie marshes. Right through to the inland sea — if it existed.

Yes. Ideal conditions. But a cool breeze would be most welcome. Mop the sweat. Wipe infected eyes. Press on. Parched . . . Water! In the heart of the marshes they found the dregs of the great flood that had drowned Oxley's chances of success. But they lost the river. It seemed that the marshes simply guzzled up the waters of the Macquarie. *Head west. We'll find out what's there one way or another.* Across a shimmering plain. A camp by a small pool of water. A cool drink. Then the attack of the mosquitos.

Hume (left) and Sturt reacted in different ways to the mozzy problem



They defied the power of smoke, and annoyed me so much, that hot as it was, I rolled myself in my boat cloak, and perspired in consequence to such a degree, that my clothes were wet through, and I had to stand at the fire in the morning to dry them. Mr Hume, who could not bear such confinement, suffered the penalty and was most unmercifully bitten.

Next morning, scratching and cursing, they headed west again. Another plain. Puddles of green, slimy water. Revolting. But when you're really thirsty who's fussy?

Hot days melted into weeks. In early January, a small range — the first they'd seen — New Year's Range. A stop to rest. Men, horses and bullocks driven to the edge of insanity by sharp-biting flies. Millions of them.

Along a creek. New Year's Creek. Push on. West. North-west. Not much water in this creek. A risk of being trapped without enough water to get back. Go on. Take the risk.

Now it's desperate. The animals must have water. Which way? Try north. One and a half kilometres, then astonishment. A noble river eighty metres wide. Flocks of pelicans. HOORAY! Sliding and yahooing men tumbling down the banks. Faces plunged into the shallows, drinking deep. *Ahhh! YUK! It's salty!*

We can't drink it!

Sturt couldn't believe his ears. But he had to believe his taste buds. Mineral springs, bubbling up from deep underground had turned the water to salt. At this time Sturt didn't know where the salt had come from though. ". . . a communication with an inland sea, I knew not."

A salty river was a disaster. Sturt's men and animals needed a drink. They were in a desperate position. Fortune smiled on them briefly when Hume wandered off and discovered a pond of fresh water. But Sturt knew he was stumped. He couldn't commit his entire group to the river — they might die of thirst if the water didn't improve in taste.

But, he made one desperate attempt to trace the river downstream. The bullocks and weakest horses were left at the freshwater pond. Sturt and Hume took two of the best horses and set off downstream. After more than sixty kilometres they had a pint of fresh water left. They couldn't go on and it seemed doubtful that they'd even get back. Their determination got them through to the main camp. Then they retreated from this salty river. *Are you going to name it before we leave, Captain Sturt? Yes. I name it the Darling River, in honour of the Governor.* Could we have guessed?

River, River, Tell us All!

Charles Sturt had it all worked out. The Macquarie, Darling and Murrumbidgee were part of the same immense river system. What he didn't know was where they went. That was what he wanted to find out. In November 1829 Governor Darling gave him his chance. *Follow those rivers Captain Sturt. Tell us whether they just fizzle out in a gigantic swamp or whether they reach the sea. Two or three months after you leave I'll send a ship round to search the south coast for you in case you make it through to the sea.*

Sturt chose to follow the Murrumbidgee. He knew he could drink the waters of that river — but he took a still with him. Just in case he'd be needing it to convert salt water into drinkable water.

After nearly two months on the track they could go no further on horseback. Thickets of tangled scrub blocked their way. Muddy ground quaked under the hoofs of their horses. The bullocks were wearing themselves out dragging a half-bogged cart through the mud. Alongside them, the wide, open highway of the Murrumbidgee casually flowed on to its mysterious destination. Sturt decided quickly and surely. *We must take to the whaleboat.*

First they had to build it. They'd brought it along in kit form. Four days to assemble. When it was finished it wasn't big enough. *We'll have to build the small boat.*

They only had the keel of that one. All the wood for the planking came from a tree on the banks of the river. Three days from tree to boat, painted and all. They'd ride in the whaleboat and tow their stores in the skiff. Now he needed to choose his men. It would have to be a careful choice.

The men who went down river with him might have to face death. At least uncertainty. And backbreaking work. There was no room for anybody who might crack under pressure. A difficult choice. Clayton, Mulholland, Fraser, McLeay, Harris, Hopkinson, Macnamee. Brave men. McLeay had come along simply because he was a friend of Sturt. Don't forget the dogs. Bob and Sailor. They'll catch kangaroo and emus for food. Willing hands pushed them off the bank. Eight men. Two dogs. Two boats. Fading into the early morning mists — "whether ever to return again being a point of greatest uncertainty."

Still Missing

Disaster. A submerged log had smashed the nose of the skiff. It had gone to the bottom and so had all the food and equipment. If they were to go further than his Sturt had to succeed at underwater salvage.

So heels of muddy boots were dug into the river bank. Work-hardened hands wrapped round rough rope. *Heave! heave! HEAVE!* First the broken nose. Then the top of the tarpaulin. At last they dragged the skiff out of the water and onto the bank. Some of the food was spoiled. They could survive on what was left.

Clayton, the carpenter had lost most of his tools. That was serious enough. But even more serious was the loss of part of the still. Without that they could not distill salty water into fresh. It had to be found. In flowing water, four metres deep and as clear as strong, milky coffee. No diving gear either. So they moored the whaleboat over the spot where the skiff had sunk and started probing the soft river bed with their oars. CLONK! *That feels like something! Jam the oar into the bottom to mark the spot.*

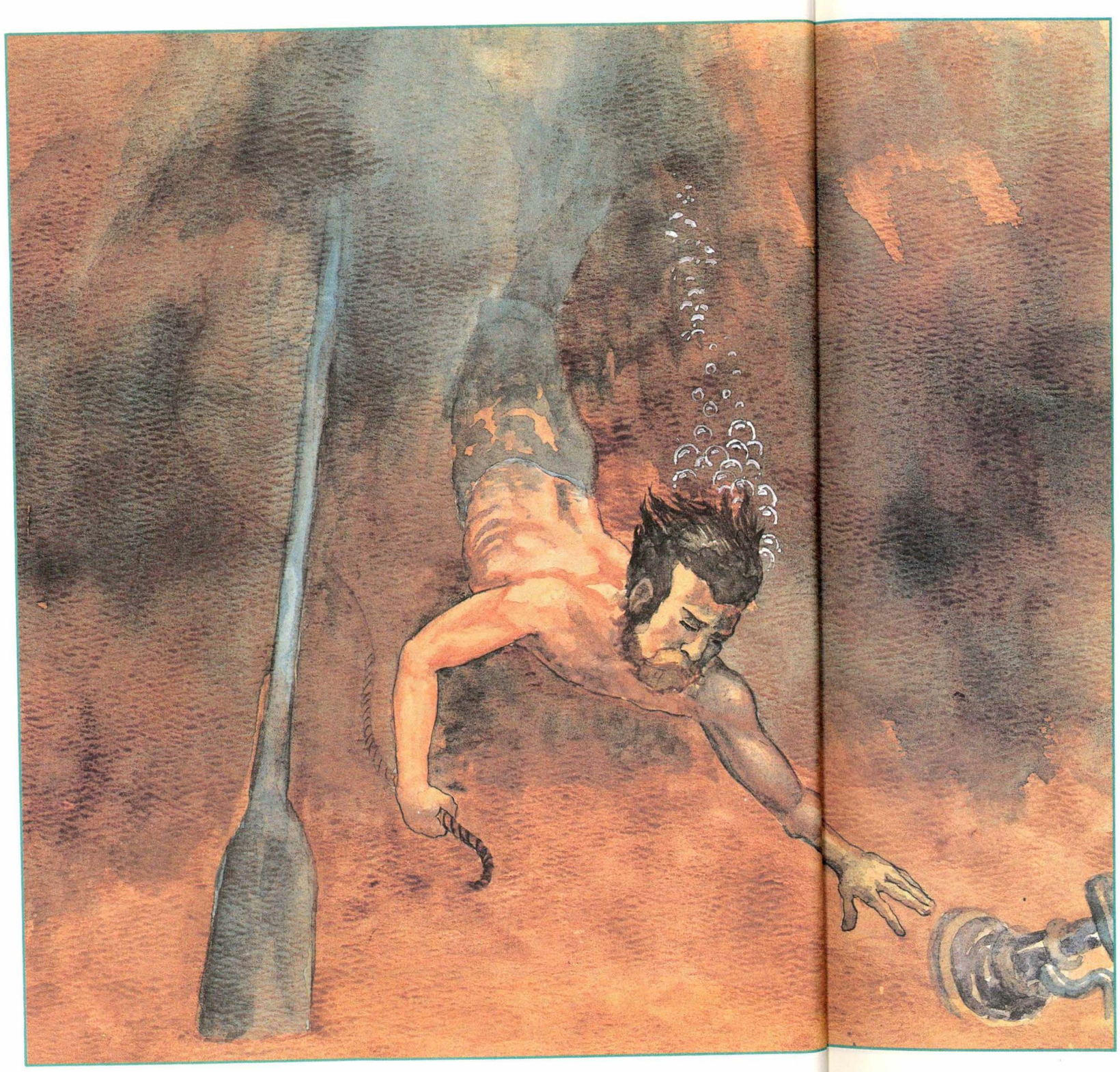
Four metres down. Sharp pain in the ears. Water up the nose. One hand on the oar. The other outstretched, groping frantically in the mud. Lungs bursting. One more grope. What's that? Slimy; hard; round. A tree branch? Can't tell. Time to let go and shoot to the surface. To collide with the keel of the whaleboat, grab the gunwhale and hang there. Expectant faces. *Yes?* Shake the dripping head. *No.*

Have a rest. Let me go down! They took it in turns. Most of the carpenter's tools came up. At least the skiff could be repaired. But the top of the still was missing.

McLeay found it and tried to lift it. He should have passed a rope round it. It held him down and he had to drop it to reach the surface. As it sank again the current rolled it further downstream. Then night swooped down and they had to wait till the morning to try again.

Early next morning their probing oars found it, metres downstream. This time there was no mistake and it was hauled aboard.

So they went on their way again. Day after day down the Murrumbidgee through wide, flat, drab plains. Reed beds along the banks. Dreary country without a hill in sight. Nothing to recommend it at all.



The Tunnel of Doom

Narrow channel. Speeding current. Arch of dark trees overhead. Gloom. And doom? The deadly debris of fallen trees lay all across their path. Was that a shadow on the water — or a tree trunk *in* the water? Any serious collision would sink them. No hope of rescue if that happened. Men manning poles all round the boat. Fending off. Pushing. Praying. More speed. Water surging and washing over and around the snags. Solid logs, bumping and scraping. Waterlogged Death running its fingers over their frail boat. Would it strike with a clenched fist?

But then, at last, relief.

". . . we were approaching a junction, and in less than a minute afterwards we were hurried into a broad and noble river . . ." They'd popped out of the fifteen metre wide, tree-choked channel of the Murrumbidgee, into the 150 metre wide River Murray.

"We had got onto the high road . . . either to the south coast, or to some important outlet." He was sure that the three major rivers crossed by Hume and Hovell, the Goulburn, Ovens and Hume, fed this mighty river. It was all starting to fall into place.

Good Tucker; Good Move

Evening camp. Black faces peering out of the bush. Friendly? Or not? Fraser won them over. He got them some good tucker with his gun. CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! A crow, a duck and a hawk. One more. CRACK! Then a noise like a stick hitting a pillow. A kookaburra dropped from its perch. Delighted Aborigines followed Fraser along the river. Gathering up the birds.

Every day they went further down the wide Murray. Sturt bent over his charts, carefully marking every detail. Then the peace shattered.

Sturt's head jerked up from his chart. Six hundred Aborigines swarming out onto a sandbank that jutted into the river. Roaring like a grand final crowd. Waving spears in anger. No chance to avoid them. *Stay calm. Prepare your weapons. Nobody must fire until I have fired both barrels. After the first volley, Harris, Hopkinson and I will fire as quickly as we can. The rest of you use your bayonets to defend the boat.* Grim faces. They were ready.

Sturt thought of a way to avoid a massacre. One shot. Kill the leader. One sure death to save many lives. He picked his target and squinted through his sights. His world shrank.

Two men in it, one white, one black.

Holding their breath. White finger tightening on the trigger. Black fingers tensing on a spear. *Closer . . . closer . . . just a bit closer and fi. . . .*

Wait! Captain Sturt! On the river bank! The old friends Fraser had fed. Running like thé wind. Down the bank, into the river. Across the shallows and straight into the furious horde.

Wild shouting. Arm waving. Arguments. The old friends won. The boat drifted past unscathed. Sturt stared straight into the eyes of the man he had been about to kill. No friendship, just peace.

Back to the charts. *Look! Another River!*

The Darling? They sailed up it to find out. But eight kilometres up an Aboriginal fishing net stopped them. Sturt could have broken through it. Could have proved his theory that this was the Darling, joining the Murray. But he didn't want to break it because too many people "depended on it for subsistence". He turned back.

They went right to the end of the Murray. Lake Alexandrina. But they couldn't cross the lake in the boat. Too many shoals and sandbanks. So they beached the boat and walked right round the lake and over the sand hills. From the sandhills they saw the ocean — and realised that there was no way their rescue ship could ever approach the coast to pick them up. Line after line of raging surf pounded the shore. *We'll have to row back, against the current.*

How many pushups can you do? Ten? Ninety? Imagine doing pushups all day, every day, for nearly two months. Sturt and his men didn't do pushups, they rowed. All day every day. For nearly two months. Every time they eased up, the current carried them downstream. Only one escape from the agony. Dream of home. Row mindlessly on, staring at the floor.

Struggling through the rapids in drenching rain. Out of the boat. Push. Heave. Roaring river. Jammed boat. Numb men, too weak to move it.

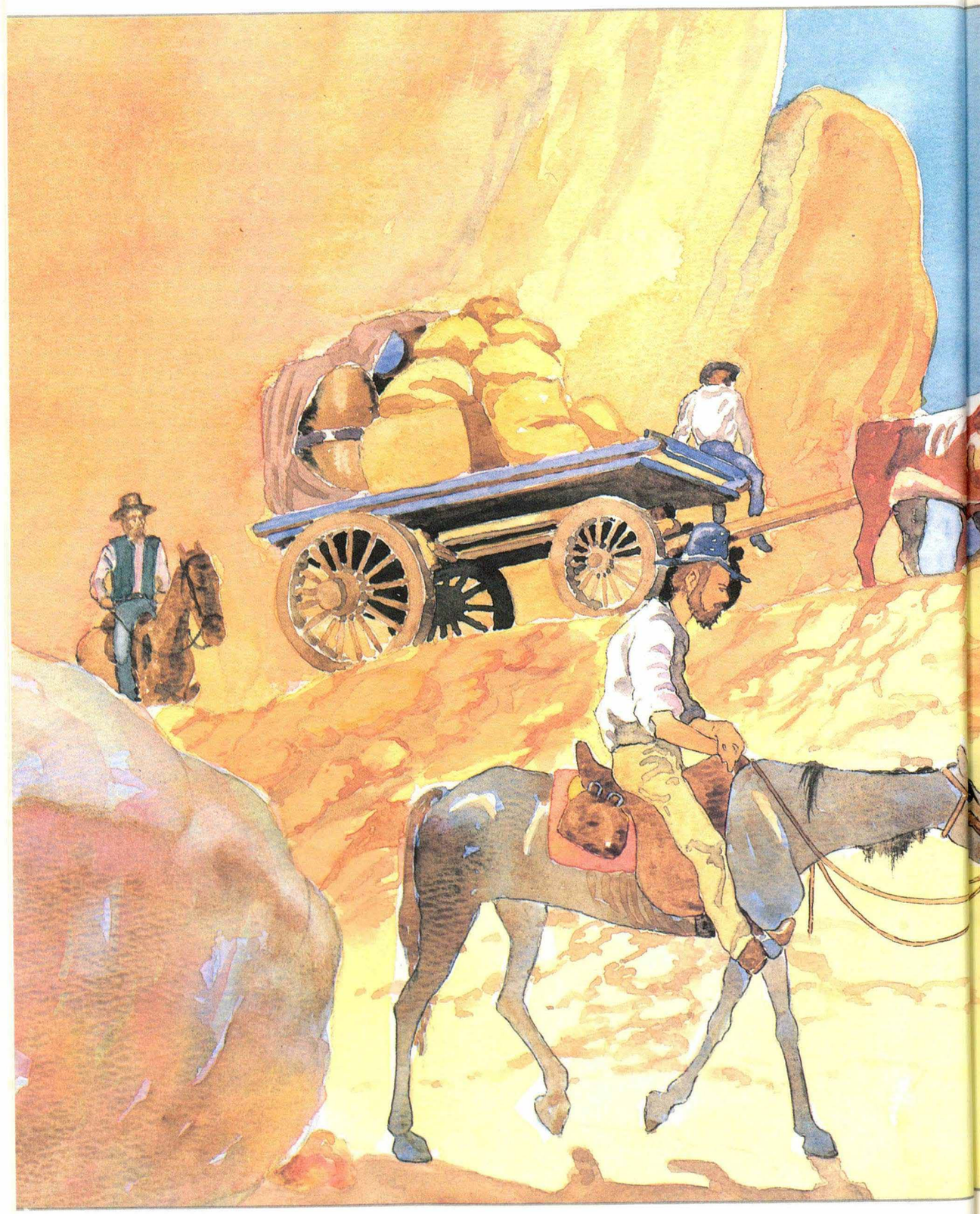
Strangers wading into the river, black strangers. Helping, heaving. Shoulder to shoulder. Out of the rapids. Back into the boat. Rowing again. No words, just thoughts.

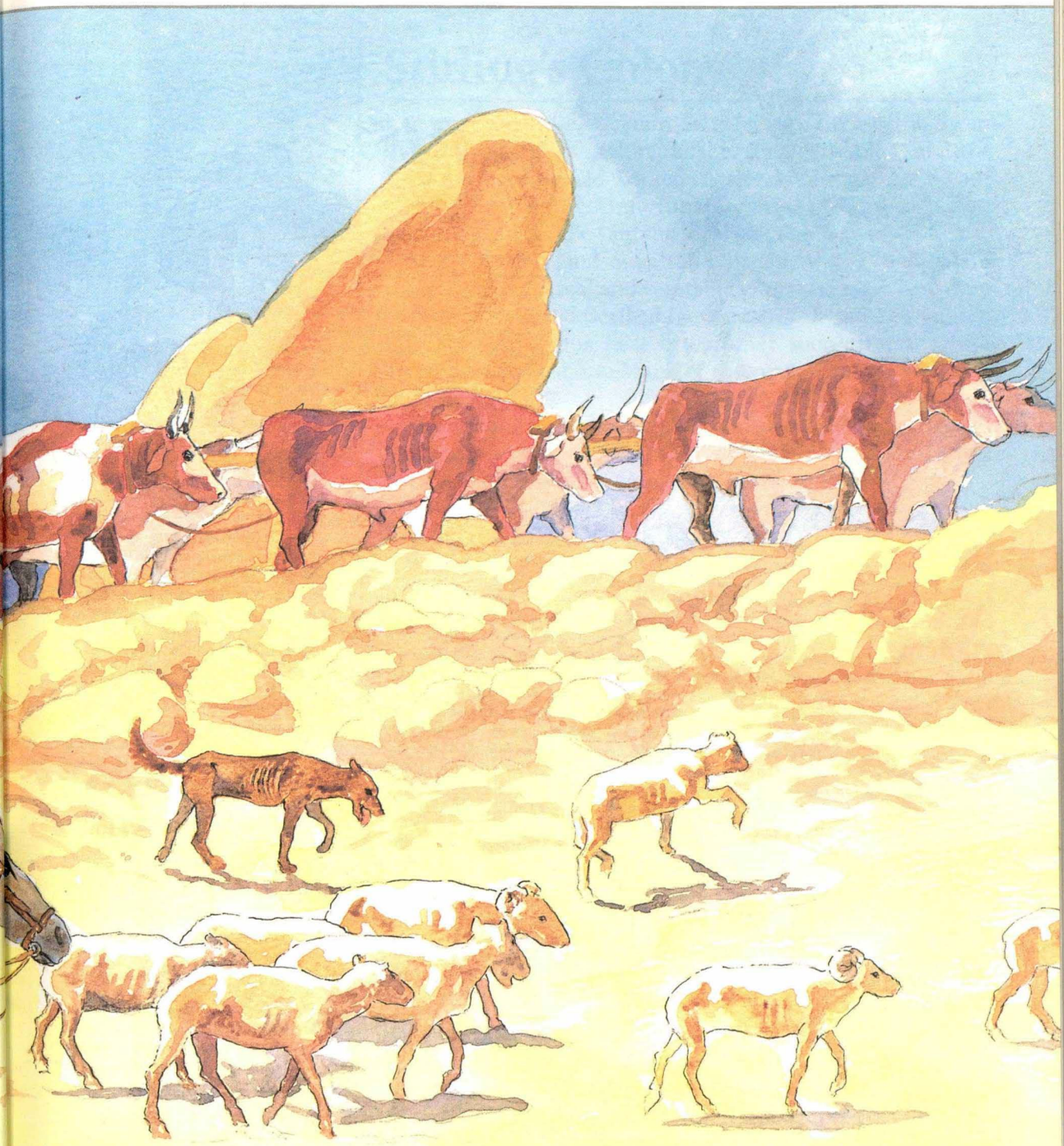
From the Murray, back up the Murrumbidgee, all the way to Yass. At last, no more rowing. They burnt the boat, and finished the job with a march to Sydney. Look at a map. Work out how far they rowed, how far they marched. With six months hard labour they had solved the Riddle of the Rivers.

Expeditions ate well on the early stages while their stores were fresh. Each day's march took them closer to the day they'd need to start working hard to find food for themselves and their animals.

It's quite easy to starve to death in the Australian bush. Native animals are hard to find — harder to catch. There are few plants which can be eaten safely.

Dwindling





Live sheep and cattle guaranteed fresh meat along the trail — but these had to be fed too. In hard country that could be almost impossible.

The Australian bush was not a happy hunting ground for Europeans. Game was scarce — and hard to shoot. But often it was their only hope to avoid starvation. Roos were the biggest catch they could hope for. Other animals — from dingos to ducks — were often even harder to find and only contributed small amounts of meat.

Stirling's Colony

Meanwhile, Captain Stirling's colony on the Swan River was taking shape. Since his visit in 1827 Stirling had worked ceaslessly to make his dream come true. Unfortunately, Fraser, the botanist, had been wrong when he said the local soil could grow anything.

Most of the land was sand. It supported the native vegetation but cereal and vegetable crops starved. The balmy autumn weather described by Captain Stirling had ignited into the murderous heat of summer soon after the first arrivals waded ashore. Many of the new colonists were not impressed!

But Stirling never lost sight of his vision. *We'll just have to find more good land . . . Ahh! Come in, Ensign Dale. I want to talk to you about exploration.*

Up Hills, and Down, Dale

August, 1830. Curtains of rain drifting down on rolling hills of grey-green forest. Everything sopping wet. Torrents of rainwater pouring off granite boulders. Robert Dale looked out from this granite-ledge shelter and sniffed. *Struth it's cold*. His three companions shivered and nodded. They were all sopping wet.

Dale looked at his little thermometer. It showed the air temperature was half a degree below freezing point! Icy cold. Dale and his companions were on the western slopes of the Darling Range — the blue hills Stirling had seen in the distance on his first visit.

The Swan River colony was squeezed between the hills and sea just as Sydney had been. But these low hills didn't pose anywhere near as many problems as the Blue Mountains. Dale's party still had to work hard though. Heavy rain had swollen the creeks. Steep gorges forced them into long detours. When there was no other alternative they even built rickety bridges to get their horses across deep gullies.

But Dale battled his way eastwards, out of the Darling Range and onto the lightly timbered plains beyond. Wonderful farming country. Then, about ninety kilometres from the colony he found the picturesque and fertile Avon Valley. The Lieutenant-Governor, Captain Stirling, gave a sigh of relief.

Four hundred kilometres south of the Swan River, at King George Sound, the settlers who had been landed to keep the French at bay were living comfortably. They'd faced food

shortages too. Fishing and hunting helped restock their stores. So did some old fashioned scrounging.

Supply ships sometimes called in. One of them had a load of bullocks on board bound for Raffles Bay. *'Ere, 'Enry. 'Ave a look at these 'ere bullocks. I think they're crook!*

Yairs, they's crook alright. Wouldn't think they'll ever make it, would you?

— No way. They'd die for sure. They'd be better off if they rested up here for a while and went up on the next ship. So the bullocks came off. The ship sailed away — and everybody at King George Sound had steak for breakfast.

Bannister Stares Death in the Face

There was only one way to travel between western Australia's two colonies. By sea; 650 kilometres. That was silly. It's only 400 kilometres overland. *We need a route to the south coast Captain Bannister. Keep an eye out for more useful land on your way.*

Captain Bannister remembered his instructions as he sat on a rock and cradled his head in his hands. Why, oh why, had the Lieutenant-Governor sent Mr Smythe on *his* expedition. If he wanted to be an explorer why didn't he wander off on his own. Nobody else would have to put up with him then! *AAAHEM!* Smythe had walked up to Bannister's side.

Bannister looked up at the befuddled face. *Yes, Mr Smythe?*

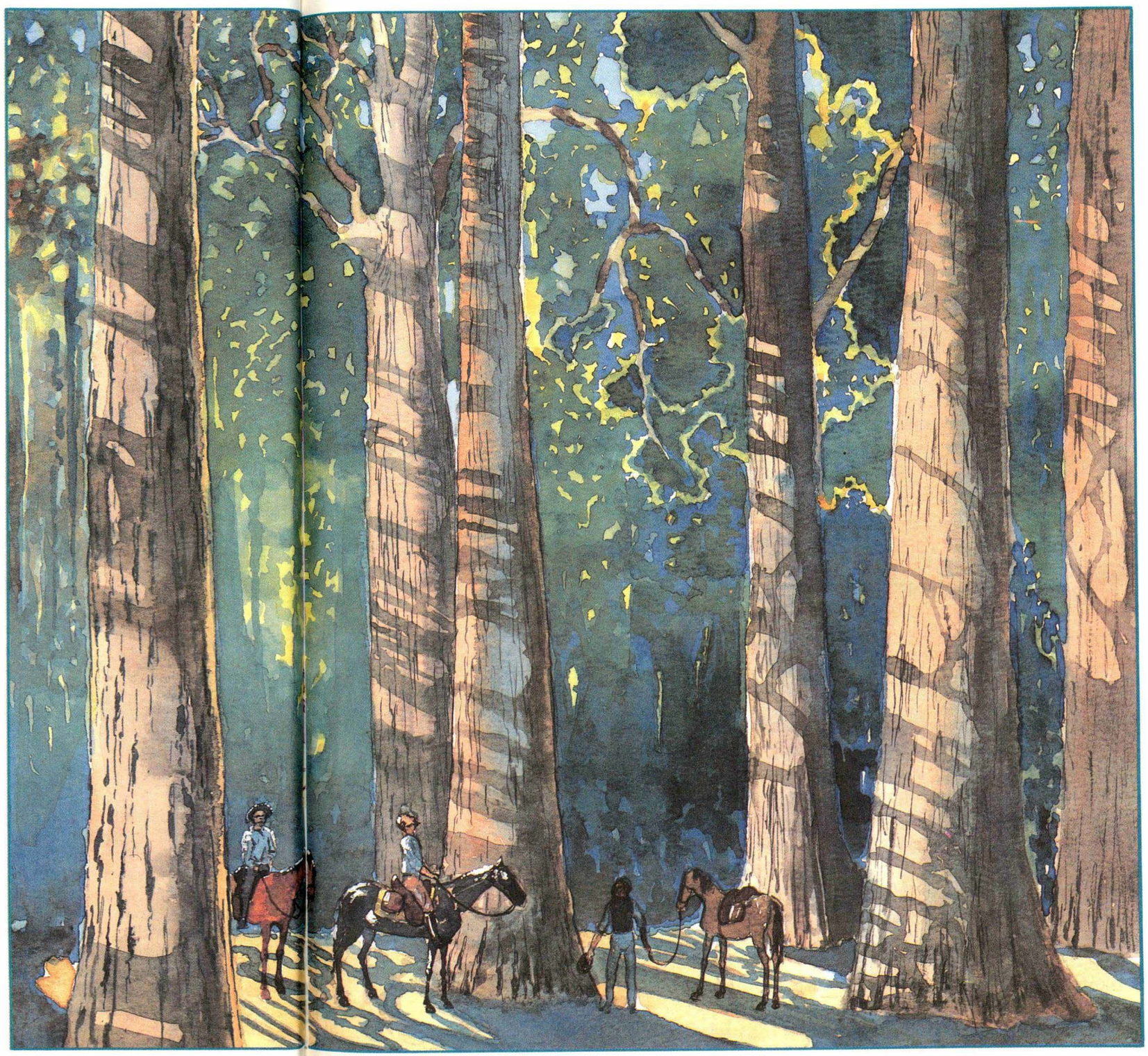
Sir, I believe we should go that *way. Further . . . er . . . west, that is.*

— If you say so Mr Smythe. We might as well go that way. We've been every other way it's possible to go!

Smythe was the colony's assistant surveyor — but he wasn't a very good navigator. Bannister and his men were lost. They'd slogged through the rough hills, marshes and ti-tree swamps and they'd eventually broken through into "broad, flat lands and valleys, moderately grassed and wooded . . . A very great portion of the tract was land of the finest description, fit for the plough, sheep, or cattle . . ." Just the place to build a farm if they could ever find it again. And they still had no idea which way to King George Sound.

> Mr Smythe attributes the mistakes in his observations to his not having a watch, and partly to the instruments with which he was furnished from his office, being out of order. He will, I trust, be able to give a satisfactory explanation to his Excellency.

Bannister discovered forests of karri trees in the southern part of Australia's west



Smythe had gone out into the bush without a chronometer — an accurate timepiece. How serious a mistake was that? Well, can you imagine Greg Chappell going to a test match without a bat? Or Peter Brock going to Bathurst without a car? Smythe went without the tools to do the job. He could have killed everybody in the party. But Smythe said west. So they went west. Then south-west. Into more hard country. *Head for those hills. I believe we'll find they are due north from King George Sound. We should be able to see the sea from their crest.*

Right Mr Smythe.

Heat of January. Long, tiring climb to the top. They weren't north of King George Sound. The sea wasn't in sight. Back down the sun-baked granite slopes. This was getting serious. Stores and strength were running low. Bannister took decisive action.

We'll head south until we hit the coast. Then we'll decide whether we turn left or right! Let's go.

It was a hard trek. But they discovered a forest of awesome, beautiful trees. Karri trees. Bannister was spellbound.

> . . . if others had not seen them I should be afraid to speak of their magnitude; I measured one, it was, breast high, forty two feet in circumference; in height, before a branch 140 or 150 feet we thought at least, and as straight as the barrel of a gun.

They hit the south coast far too far west. Near Cape Chatham, 150 kilometres from King George Sound. The coastal track was terrible. All their provisions had gone. Rough country. Two horses died. Bannister and his men nearly followed them. They ate shellfish every day for nineteen days.

Finally, gratefully, they staggered in to King George Sound.

They hadn't found a route from the Swan River to the South Coast but one good thing had come of their ordeal. When he recovered Captain Bannister pointed out that they'd been forced to explore land that nobody would have even thought of examining for twenty or thirty years.

It's War Then!

Sydney, 1831. George Clark, a repentant escaped convict with a message for the Governor. *Ahh, well Your Excellency, Governor, Sir, I'm not sure if I travelled 500 miles or 5 000 miles down that river. And never, not once, Your Excellency, Sir, did the direction vary from west. Aye, west all the way. Kindur the natives call it. And at the end is a wide sea . . . with an island in the middle of it. Is that information any use to you . . . Sir?*

A major river! An inland sea! Acting Governor, Sir Patrick Lindesay acted swiftly. *Call in the Surveyor-General.* That was Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell.

Mitchell was bursting for a chance to do some exploring. He'd seen Captain Sturt return triumphant — and he hated being outshone.

In November, 1831, Mitchell headed north from the Liverpool Plains. He found a broad river but this wasn't a new discovery. It was the Barwon, part of the upper reaches of the Darling. Mitchell began to doubt that the Kindur existed.

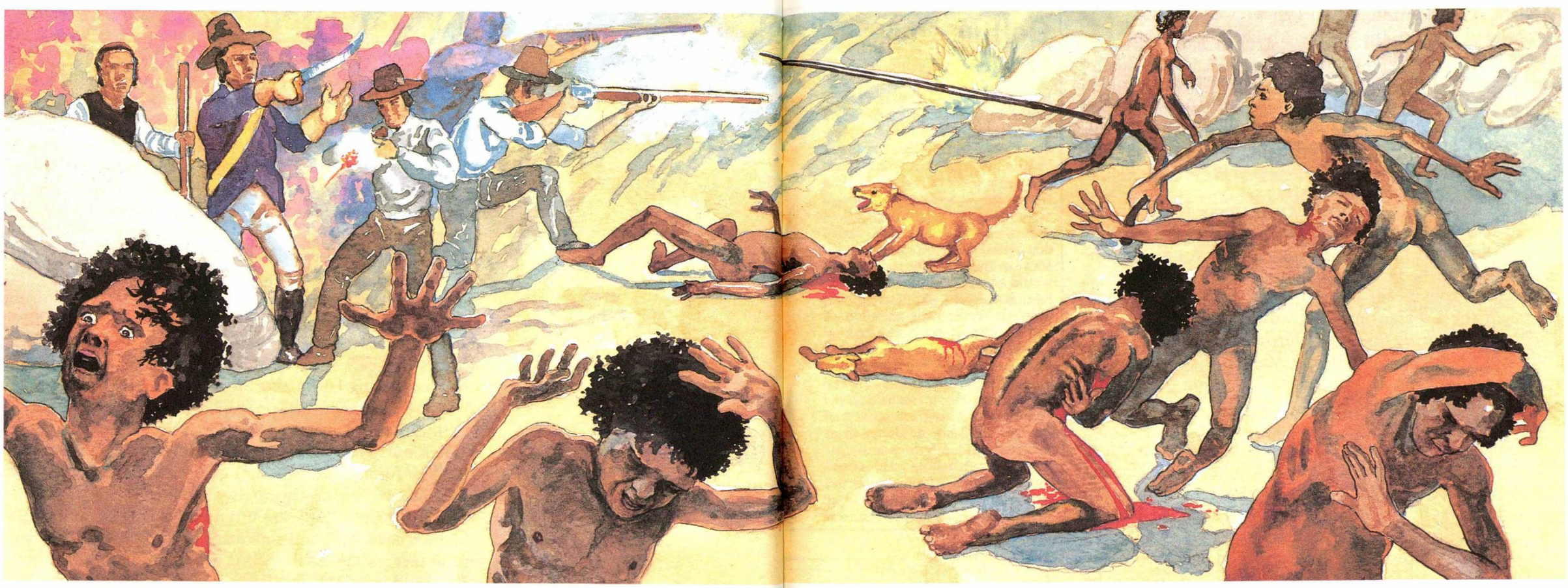
Then horrifying news. Two men from his team had been killed by Aborigines. Mitchell gave up and trekked back to Sydney. So where was the mighty Kindur?

It didn't exist. Clark had invented his story. Quite a joke: two men dead, Mitchell convinced that the Aborigines were brutal savages and his ill-feeling towards Sturt running hot.

Mitchell could have been one of the true heroes of Australian exploration. He was brave. He'd served in the army; he'd seen plenty of combat; he could write well and his powers of observation were excellent. His scientific knowledge was impressive. He was an artist and a scholar. Mitchell was also a jealous man. He wanted the kind of reputation that Sturt was enjoying. He had to outdo Sturt or perhaps prove that Sturt had made a mistake in his discoveries. And there was a weak link in Sturt's report.

Sturt hadn't proved that the Darling flowed into the Murray. He'd certainly found a river joining the Murray below the Murrumbidgee. But was this really the Darling? It seemed odd that the river which flowed into the Murray was quite fresh when the Darling was supposed to be salty.

Governor Bourke agreed that the mystery of the Murray-Darling should be cleared up. *Off you go Major Mitchell!* So, in 1833, wearing full dress uniform, Mitchell proudly trotted out of Parramatta at the head of a large expedition. Bullocks, sheep, drays, canvas boats and about twenty armed men.



Thomas Mitchell's party attacking hostile Aborigines near the Murray in 1836. Mitchell's expeditions unlike Sturt's were plagued with fatal confrontations

Tragedy struck very soon. Richard Cunningham disappeared. He was Allan Cunningham's brother. He'd wandered off on his own and got lost in the bush. Aborigines found him and befriended him — for a while. When he tried to leave them they crushed his skull with nulla-nullas.

Mitchell searched for Cunningham for two weeks before he learned what had happened. No soldier like Mitchell could tolerate losing a good man to a band of guerillas. The expedition went onto war footing. On the banks of the Darling, Mitchell built a log fort and named it after the new governor, Fort Bourke.

With his supplies secure in the fort, Mitchell launched his canvas boats. Rapids. Even the shallow draft lightweight boats couldn't get over them. *Back onto the horses.*

Mitchell moved 500 kilometres down the Darling. He didn't find the junction with the Murray but he saw enough to have to admit that Sturt had been right: the direction of the Darling, the known position of the Murray. Yes. They must eventually meet. No point going any further. *Let's go back to the fort.* That's when trouble struck.

Two of Mitchell's men were filling their billies from the river. An Aborigine grabbed a billy and tried to run off with it. One of the men grabbed him before he could get away. CRUNCH! A solid smack on the skull with a nulla-nulla. One white man down, senseless.

BANG! Protect your mates. The Aborigine shot in groin. Screaming agony; gushing blood. The wounded Aborigine plunged into the river and swam for the opposite bank.

Another shot: an Aboriginal woman writhing in pain and shock. Pounding footsteps, running hard. Crackle of shots from three more guns as help arrived. Another Aboriginal warrior staggering in disbelief as his life-blood pumped out of the hole in his chest.

The explorers retreated, three guarding the rear, one helping a mate with a splitting headache. Leather boots kicked dust over the forgotten billy that started it all.

Nightfall. Mourning Aborigines wailed and wept somewhere out in the night. Mitchell stared into the blackness. He was furious.

> It was then that I regretted most bitterly the inconsiderate conduct of some of the men. I was indeed liable to pay dear for geographical discovery, when my honour and character were delivered over to convicts, on whom, although I might confide as to courage, I could not always rely for humanity.

Ten weeks later Mitchell and his men trooped back into the settled districts. He had proved that the Darling did meet the Murray. So? Sturt had been saying that for years — and he hadn't killed anybody. But Mitchell still wasn't satisfied.

Mitchell convinced himself that Sturt might have mistaken the Lachlan for the Darling. *Yes, that's it! The Lachlan could easily flow much further west than Mr Oxley supposed. It might not join the Murrumbidgee at all. It might flow into the Murray, instead! Captain Sturt could easily have mistaken it for the Darling. Ha! Here's my chance!*

A major expedition was launched with the intention of disproving someone else's work. It was March 1836. Hot and dry. Drought had sucked the inland rivers dry. Even the bed of the Lachlan was dusty. Mitchell went well supplied. Horses, cattle, sheep, drays, boats and a small army of heavily armed men. A military campaign. A military mind in charge. Ready for battle. "I was proceeding on a service not very likely to be peaceful, for the natives here assured us that the myalls were coming up *murry coola* to meet us".

Myalls was the name given to tribes of Aborigines who had not yet accepted European colonisation. They were still fighting to keep their lands free. Murry coola, in the dialect of the Aborigines talking to Mitchell means *very angry.*

Mitchell was determined that they were not going to stand in his way this time. It wasn't that he hated Aborigines. He had several respected Aborigines with him. Piper was his favourite. "They could read traces on the earth, climb trees or dive into the water, better than the ablest of us. In tracing lost cattle, speaking to the wild natives, hunting or diving Piper was the most accomplished man in the camp."

But myalls were a different proposition . . .

Collins Cops Out

It's a good job that Colonel David Collins wasn't in charge of establishing the colony in New South Wales. Unlike Governor Phillip he probably would have given up. That's what he did when he was sent to start a settlement at Port Phillip.

Port Phillip had been discovered by Captain John Murray in 1802. Murray said it would be an ideal place to settle. French Captain Baudin had also been there. Perhaps the French had an idea of starting a colony.

The English Government wasted no time. *Colonel Collins; sail to Port Phillip and plant the English flag there. Start a colony.*

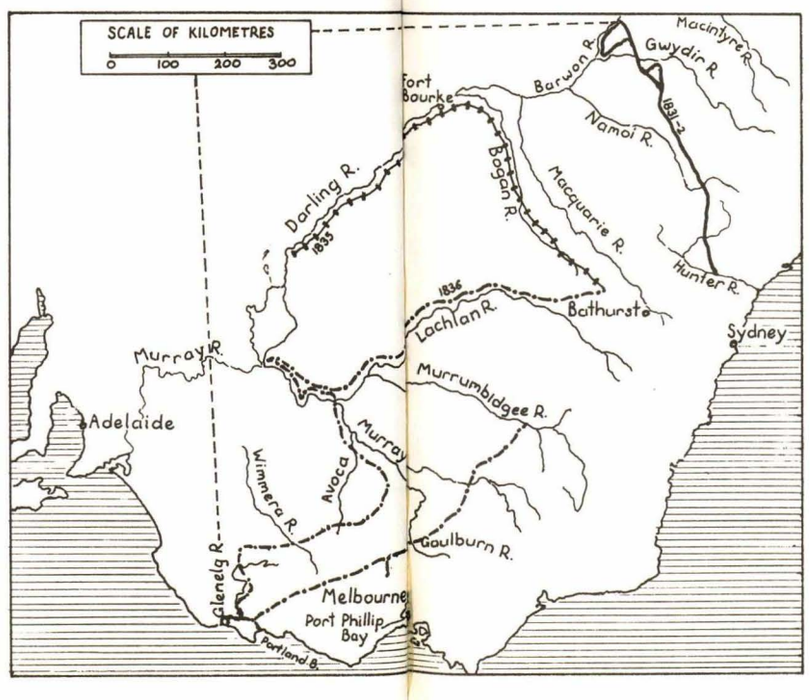
Collins and his fleet arrived in October 1803 on the doorstep of the rich and fertile south-east corner of Australia. He could have pioneered a route round the southern end of the Great Dividing Range and into the rich lands to the west of the mountains. He could have travelled 300 kilometres over easy country to Australia's greatest river, the Murray.

Of course Collin's didn't know that these discoveries were within his grasp. All he needed was half the spirit and courage that Governor Phillip had shown and he could have become Australia's most successful pioneer.

But Collins was weak. He whinged and complained — and he convinced Governor King that the area was totally unsuitable for settlement. Not even the French would want it! King gave him a choice.

Move to the north coast of Van Diemen's Land and start a new colony. Or move to the Derwent Estuary on the south coast of Van Diemen's Land and bolster the settlement that's already there.

Collins pulled up his tent pegs and anchors in January 1804. He went to the Derwent and helped build Hobart. He could have helped build a nation.



Mitchell's Expeditions 1831-1836

Sturt 1, Mitchell Nil

Mud had stuck to Oxley's boots. Dust billowed up from Mitchell's as he followed Oxley's old track down the Lachlan. Then the first disappointment. The Lachlan did join the Murrumbidgee. Oh well, that's the way it goes. Sturt might be right after all. *Damn it!!*

Mitchell dumped stores and his heavy drays at a depot near the junction of the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee and set off with a lightly equipped but heavily armed scouting party. They followed the Murrumbidgee to the Murray and into the territory of murry coola Aborigines.

Deadly hide and seek began almost immediately. Shadowy figures in the bush. Waiting for a bullock to wander away from the main group. Waiting for a white man to follow it?

Mitchell didn't wait to find out. He dismissed his formal military training. That would have seen him leading a charge against his enemies. Or standing in line and firing volley after volley into the ranks of Aborigines in a pitched battle. No. An ambush would solve his problems.

Silently some of Mitchell's men dropped out of line and melted into the bush. The rest pressed on. Decoys to draw the Aborigines into the trap. Heat baked the killing party. Time creeping by. Hot sun beating down on prone bodies. Dust in the nostrils. Grass seeds in their socks. Smell of oil and gunpowder. Smell of strangers. Smell of death.

Wet black noses picked up the scent first. Aborigines' dogs. Hackles were up. Deep-throated growls alerted the native warriors. Danger! Spear arms up. Tensed.

Unbearable suspense tightened a trigger finger. BANG! *Too soon! Wait!*

Too late! Fire! Fire! Give 'em heaps! Withering storm of rifle fire. Aborigines running for their lives. Some dead. Some thrashing out their lives in the dust. Pounding feet. Pounding hearts.

CHARGE!

Mitchell's decoy party up ahead turned back for the kill. Rapid fire. Hot lead singing through flesh and bone. One hundred and eighty Aborigines in the trap. Eighty shots fired. Seven dead.

It was enough. Mitchell had seized the initiative and thrashed his enemies. He had no more problems with myalls. That night wailing and weeping floated across the plains as the Aborigines mourned their dead. Mitchell stared into the blackness. Satisfied. Overhead the stars blazed as brightly as ever.

Sturt 2, Mitchell Nil

Wouldn't that rot your socks! Mitchell was disgusted. The Darling *did* flow into the Murray. Sturt had been right. Now Mitchell would really have to pull something out of the bag if he wanted to establish himself as the colony's most successful explorer. *Prepare the boats. Let's cross the Murray and explore the southern banks.*

South. Fine country. Brimful rivers — the Loddon, Avoca, Wimmera and Glenelg. Luxuriant vegetation. Mitchell thought he'd discovered the best country in Australia. Australia Felix, he called it. Australia's Happy Land.

Mitchell conveniently forgot the army of men who had helped him on his way to this fertile corner. "Of this Eden it seemed I was the only Adam and it was indeed a sort of paradise to me..!"

He went past the Grampian Mountains. Down the Glenelg in the boats. Right down to the sea. Then east, overland to Portland Bay; splendid country. Mitchell stopped and gazed around him. "As I stood, the first European intruder on the sublime solitude of these verdant plains, as yet untouched by flocks or herds, I felt conscious of being the harbinger of mighty changes"

Yes, the thrill of being first. *...er...Hello. What are you doing here?*

Oh we live here sir. Henty's the name. Edward Henty. We've been here for nearly two years!

The Henty family was busy farming, fishing and whaling at Portland. They had a thriving community ready to push out into Mitchell's Australia Felix. Mitchell had staked his claim on a major discovery just in time.

Grey's Colourful Career

London, 1836. Two fine black horses, snorting and tossing their heads impatiently. Jingle of harness. Carriage straining against the brake. At last. Two smartly dressed officers strode out of Lord Glenelg's office and stepped into the carriage.

Shake the reins. *GET UP THERE!* As the carriage turned the corner Lieutenant George Grey peered out the back window. *YAHOO! We did it!* His companion Lieutenant Franklin Lushington slapped him on the back. Two young officers off on a very dangerous mission.

Colonial Secretary, Lord Glenelg, thought it would be a good idea to dump a group of explorers on the north-west tip of the continent and let them blaze a trail all the way to Perth. He was sure they'd find another river to match the Murray. Glenelg's expedition was silly. He sent an inexperienced group of men under these two enthusiastic and able but inexperienced officers. Grey and Lushington had offered to trek north from Perth to the Kimberley coast. Glenelg accepted but decided that the journey should begin on the Kimberley coast and work it's way south.

Grey's and Lushington's schooner dropped anchor in Hanover Bay on the Kimberley coast in November 1837.

Twelve men, fifty sheep and goats, crowded onto the beach. Grey wrote "I soon found that we had landed under very unfavourable circumstances."

Their way inland lay over "huge blocks of red sandstone confusedly piled together. Spiny spinifex grass grew all over these blocks, hiding cracks and crevices."

Grey decided they needed horses. Lushington sailed off in the schooner. Timor was the closest source and he came back with Timor ponies. Tough little animals, but difficult to control. *Better than nothing — I suppose.* Nobody had thought about the weather. They'd landed in the wet season. Torrential rain, almost every day. Suffocating heat, humidity and mosquitos. Grey quickly decided that they had no chance of reaching Perth, 2 400 kilometres away.

The country was just too rough. Even the sheep and goats were having trouble getting over it. But Grey vowed to cover as much ground as he could before he was forced back to his ship. Then the Aborigines appeared.

Grey strode forward to greet them. That brought a hail of spears. The explorers shot over their heads. *Don't shoot to kill! We're here to make friends!* Then another hail of spears.

"Escape was impossible and surrender to such enemies out of the question . . . I had not made two steps in advance when three spears struck me almost at the same moment." Two glanced harmlessly off his body and gunstock but the third bit deeply. "I fell severely wounded in the hip . . ."

" . . . as I fell I heard the savage yells of the natives,delight and triumph. These recalled me to myself and roused me by momentary rage and indignation. . .the spear was wrenched from my wound and I advanced again unsteadily." A brave move. He could have been shishkabobbed by a dozen spears. But his courage and his wounded rage turned the tide. One Aborigine threatened him with a club but then turned and ran for cover.

Grey's aim was deadly. His bullet blasted into the Aborigine's back. And that settled it. "Native after native dropped away and noiselessly disappeared . . . but for the unhappy being that lay on the ground before me, I could have thought the whole affair was a horrid dream."

Grey was in agony from his wound and tormented by the "cruel necessity" of taking human life. He slept fitfully: suffering from nightmares, screams in his mind. Startled into wakefulness, he heard screams in the night. The Aborigines mourning their dead leader. He lay there for two weeks. His hip didn't heal — but he still tried to do his job. He had to be lifted onto his pony but he struck across beautiful, terrible country to discover the Glenelg river. Not Mitchell's Glenelg, babbling through Australia Felix, but a north western river surrounded by swamps, rough ranges and jungle.

Pain. Exhaustion. Ponies dying. Then they found a large cave. Glaring down on them, a painted figure. Weird and awesome. As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom of the cave, more figures. An art gallery in the depths of the bush. *Why is it here? What does it mean?* Nobody could tell.

Eventually, pain, exhaustion and rough country won. Grey could go no further. *Back to the ship.* In two months they'd only covered 110 kilometres. Grey hated the taste of defeat. "I felt very loathe to leave the spot." He knew he'd be back.

A Shining Salty Barrier

Adelaide 1838. Cattle bellowing. Sheep wheeling round in panic. Eager people bidding for the fattest animals. Snapping up fresh meat at any price. John Eyre patted his bulging wallet. He'd overlanded the stock from Melbourne. Good training for an explorer.

Eyre was keen to expand his business but he'd need good land and plenty of it to do that! So, in 1839 he left Adelaide and headed north looking for green pastures.

Purple-red ranges, — the Flinders Ranges. Mountains Matthew Flinders had seen when he'd reached the head of Spencer's Gulf. Flinders had been looking for a river. He'd found mountains.

Eyre was looking for pastures. He found a lake. *Useful?* No. Blinding, white, dry, salty. Lake Torrens — a barrier to the north. Impassable. Eyre went back to Adelaide. *We'll look somewhere else.*

Exploration seemed to have changed. Up to now most of it had been over land suitable for farming and grazing. Now explorers glimpsed the warm edge of Australia's red centre.

George Grey examining Aboriginal rock paintings

Black Days For Grey

George Grey was fit again. His spear wound had healed — but his pride was still hurting. This time he had to succeed in finding a track through to Perth from the north coast. In February, 1839 he gathered eleven men and three boats and hitched a ride on an American whaler.

They were dropped on Bernier Island and set about building a depot. By sunset the whaler was only a dot on the horizon and their stores were safely buried. *We'll examine Shark Bay. Then we'll explore to the north as far as we can go. When we're forced back, we'll return to our depot, replenish our stores and then strike south for Perth. This will be a most useful expedition! Time for a smoke. Where's the tobacco?* It had been left behind on the whaler.

Next day. Hot, sweaty men trooped back to the depot. *Not a drop! No water anywhere on the island!*

OK. We'll leave for the mainland. There'll be water over there.

Three boats set out. Within minutes one was smashed against the rocks by the surf. Half a tonne of stores feeding the fish. *Move over. Make room!*

Two boats. Six men in each. Over to the mainland. They made some discoveries. The Gascoyne River and Lyell Range, and off in the distance a wide, shimmering lake, dotted with islands. *This is worth checking out!* Hard going. *It's not getting any closer!* They'd been tricked by a mirage. *Back to the depot!*

A stiff wind whipped the waves into white caps. Spray soaked the men in the boats. *I feel seasick, sir.* But when they reached Bernier Island horror swept away all the discomfort. Raging seas had scoured the beach; dug up their stores; scattered them all over the rocks. *We've 'ad it sir.*

Not yet, we haven't. In Grey's mind there were three choices. Go to the mainland and wait for someone to come looking. Get back in the boats and head for Timor. Or get back in the boats and head for Perth. Life or death. *Choose carefully, Mr. Grey.*

"I determined not to decide hastily between these plans, and in order more fully to compose my mind, I sat down and read a few chapters of the Bible." Sea wind rustled the pages; whipped his hair across his forehead. Flying sand stung his face. Dirty grey breakers foamed against the rocks. He closed the Bible.

We'll head for Perth. Nearly nine hundred kilometres, in open boats. Some of the men disagreed. They wanted to go to Perth. But not by boat. Not past the cliffs that had smashed the Dutch East Indiaman *Zuytdorp* to pieces.

Grey insisted. Oars dug in and the boats swished out of Shark Bay. Out past Steep Point; the most westerly tip of the Australian mainland. South along the Zuytdorp Cliffs. *No chance of landing now.*

But the sea wanted to push them into the foaming, terrifying thunder of Indian Ocean swells at the base of the cliffs. *Don't ease up on those oars men. We're dead if you do.*

At last, clear of those cliffs. Gantheaume Bay. Chance for a rest. *That's heavy surf, Mr. Grey. It'll be dangerous to try landing there!* But there was no choice. In towards the beach. Green walls hissing towards the shore. Spray blowing off their crests. Grey's boats plunged into the surfline.

> The breaker we were on curled up in the air, lifting the boat with it, and when we had gained the summit I looked down from a great height not upon water, but upon a bare sharp black rock. For one second the boat hung upon the top of the wave, in the next I felt the sensation of falling rapidly; then a tremendous shock

The end of Grey's plan to reach Perth by boat

and crash which jerked me away among the rocks and breakers, and for the few following seconds I heard nothing above but the din of waves whilst I was rolling about amongst men and a torn boat and water kegs.

Shipwrecked. Five hundred kilometres to go and only a fingertip sized piece of meat and a palmful of flour for each kilometre. "No resource was now left to us but to endeavour to reach Perth by walking; yet when I looked at the sickly faces of some of the party, and saw their wasted frames, I much doubted if they retained the strength to execute such a task."

Grey drove them as long as he could. Then he realised that they would all perish at the rate they were travelling.

I'll go on ahead to find help. Keep going as long as you can. I won't rest till I find help or I drop. With a few of the strongest behind him he strode off. They pushed themselves mercilessly. Burning thirst. Hunger. Jelly-legs.

They came to a pool of disgusting slimy mud. Down their throats it went. At least it was cold and wet. Lying by the mud pool was very pleasant. "I had much desire to sink into the sleep of death . . . My life was not worth . . . the effort it cost me to move; but other lives depended on mine, so I rose up weak and giddy, and by degrees induced the rest to start also."

A delicious feed of frogs. *Still weak — but now we'll make it. He staggered into Perth and told his story. Hurried preparations began. Horses. Men. Food. Water. Rum. Shovels — just in case we need to . . .*

Rest easy Mr. Grey. We'll soon find them for you.

— No fear. I'm coming too. Grey was the finest of leaders. He'd risked his life for his men. Now he pushed himself to the very end of his endurance to go back with the rescue party. They found them all, along the coast. Mostly alive — just. One was dead, Grey's friend, Frederick Smith. *"Fetch those shovels."*

Most of the time South Australia's vast salt lakes have a thin salt crust on top and deep mud below. This makes them almost impossible to cross as Edward Eyre was to discover

Probing West

August,1839. South Australian coast, somewhere near the western border. Dreary scrub. Scrabbly limestone. No place to bring stock. Edward John Eyre stopped and gazed westwards. His horse drooped its head and pawed weakly at the hard ground. Eyre blew out a long sigh and turned back to the east. His Aboriginal companion followed. The horses plodded behind them, desperate for a drink. Puddles, dumped by passing showers, saved them. Back to the depot near Streaky Bay. Gather the men. Repack the stores. Head back to Adelaide, beaten.

Adelaide 1840. Eyre shaved a new, sharp point onto his quill, folded his penknife, and stared down at the paper on his desk. *Um . . . how should I say it . . . this proposed expedition to the west has to be stopped . . . this proposed expedition is a waste of time . . .* He dipped the quill into the inkpot. *Your Excellency . . .*

South Australia wanted more land. A pocket of reasonable country had been found near Port Lincoln soon after Eyre had returned from Streaky Bay. Perhaps Eyre had missed something. Perhaps there was good land out there. Perhaps stock could be overlanded all the way to Perth. *We'd better find out.* Eyre wouldn't hear of it. *I've been there. It's desert. Drab, dreary, dry desert. Let* me *lead an expedition* north. *Past the Flinders Ranges. Past Lake Torrens. That's where we'll find land for our flocks and herds!*

South Australia's Assistant Commissioner of Lands, Captain Charles Sturt, handed him a Union Jack. *Plant it in the very centre of the continent, Mr. Eyre. I wish I was going with you.* Cheering women. Men galloping alongside on horseback. *HOORAY for Mr. Eyre! He's off to the centre of Australia. HOORAY! HOORAY!*

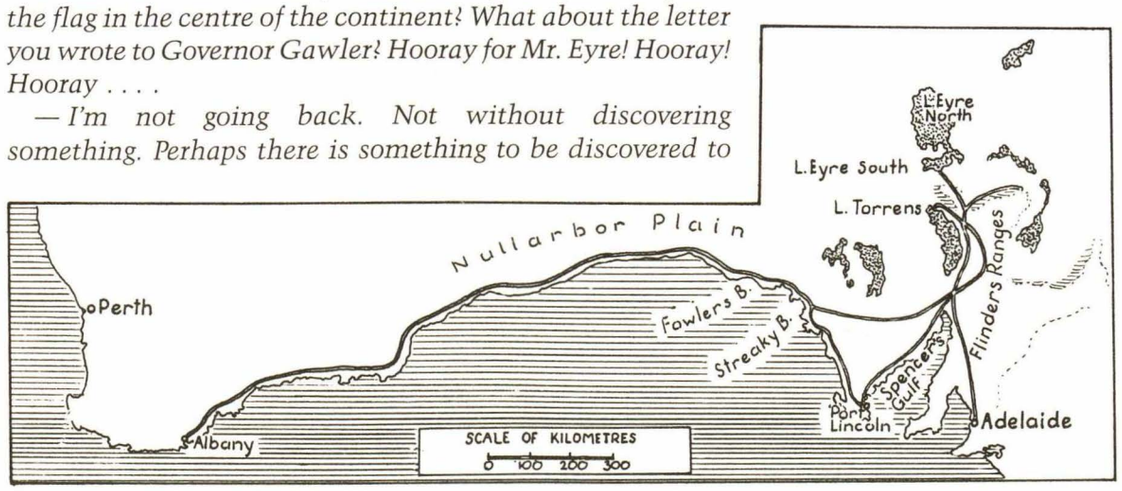
Eyre's base camp was set up at the head of Spencer's Gulf. A small ship, the *Waterwitch,* sailed up the gulf with more stores and his party of eight men set out for great discovery. Eyre decided on a quick scouting trip to plan the best route north. He took one of the men, an Aboriginal bushman. They rode to the edge of the salt lake Eyre had seen earlier. It was hard, shining white and dry. *CRUNCH! CRUNCH!* Eyre's feet broke through the brittle crust and sank into slimy mud. *We'll never cross this lake!* Three months probing found nothing but a glittering salt lake round from the north to the west. To the east lay the Flinders Ranges. Spectacular country — but a harsh and forbidding barrier. No point trying to travel through them to the north. *We're trapped. Now what are we going to do?*

Return to Adelaide, Mr. Eyre? Tell them you made a mistake. What about the promise to Captain Sturt to plant the flag in the centre of the continent? What about the letter you wrote to Governor Gawler? Hooray for Mr. Eyre! Hooray! Hooray . . . .

— I'm not going back. Not without discovering something. Perhaps there is something to be discovered to the west . . . I'll march to King George Sound to find out — or I'll die trying!

Eyre's Expedition 1840-41

salt lakes



Waterwitch was sent back to Adelaide for more stores. On board was a letter from Eyre, explaining the change of plan. While the ship was away Eyre moved camp to Streaky Bay. *Waterwitch* didn't come back but another ship *Hero* was sent instead. *Ahh! Mail from home! Mail from the Governor!* Eyre's happiness at receiving mail soon vanished. Every letter said the same thing. *Stop being so stupid and come home!*

Not until I discover something! So, Eyre, his overseer Baxter, two Aborigines from South Australia and one from Western Australia set off leading ten horses. They were going to walk right round the Great Australian Bight. Baxter wasn't keen on the idea — but he was loyal. So was Wylie, the Western Australian Aborigine. The other two Aborigines were good bushmen but didn't mix well with the group.

In the heat of summer they plodded on. Hot. Thirsty. Death loped along behind them. Horses began to die first. Terribly. Life burned out of them by searing heat. When they dropped, Eyre and Baxter cut away the meat and dried it for later. Would there be a later?

After weary weeks the weather cooled. Autumn. But still, water was hard to find. Now the nights grew cold as sea-winds shrieked in over the coast.

Eyre's Nightmare

The surviving horses were set free at night. One chance to wander about, pathetically looking for a mouthful of grass here or there. Someone had to guard them of course, or they might wander too far. Eyre was watching them at midnight on the 29th of April.

Dark wisps of cloud blotting out the full moon. Moaning wind. Tossing, rustling bushes. Eyre shivered and pulled his collar tighter. *DUMPFFF* A gunshot from the distant camp. A signal? *What's the matter?* Eyre's shout whipped away from his mouth by the wind.

Then a running figure. Black. Wylie. *Mr.Baxter's dead!* The other two Aborigines had shot him. Then they'd run away with most of the stores. Imagine Eyre's horror.

> At the dead hour of night, in the wildest and most inhospitable waste of Australia, with the fierce wind raging in unison with the scene of violence before me, I was left with a single native, whose fidelity I could not rely upon, and who, for aught I knew, might be in league with the other two, who, perhaps were, even now, lurking about to take my life.

Trustworthy or not, Eyre was stuck with Wylie. In the morning they moved out. Baxter lay where he fell, staring sightlessly up into the morning sky. They couldn't bury him. Thick unbreakable limestone covered the ground. Retreat was impossible. In the direction they'd come from there was no water for days. West was their only chance.

Dried horsemeat, tough and stringy, kept the men going. Early morning dew, soaked up with a sponge gave them enough water to wet their lips. Down by the sea they dug into the sandhills and found fresh water. That gave them the strength to go a few more kilometres. Two starving men, driven only by a determination to stay alive. To keep going. Somehow, a few of the horses survived to keep going with them.

Then a miracle. A ship at anchor in a beautiful bay. Five hundred and sixty kilometres east of Albany, Captain Rossiter of the whaler, *Mississippi*, looked up as two tattered, skinny men tottered out of the sandhills.

Rossiter had moored the *Mississippi* in Thistle Cove while his whaleboats cast about looking for prey. He made Eyre and Wylie comfortable on board. More food than they could eat. Clean clothes. Soft beds. Food for the wretched horses. New shoes for their split and worn hoofs. Eyre showed his gratitude by renaming the spot Rossiter Bay.

After two weeks aboard the *Mississippi* Eyre and Wylie declared themselves fit to continue and refused the captain's offer of a lift into Albany. So Eyre, and the man whose loyalty he had doubted marched there. Eyre had discovered something at last. He'd discovered that he'd been right in the first place. There was no way that stock could survive on the coast of the Bight. There was no practical stockroute from Adelaide to Albany. *Hooray for Mr. Eyre!*

Adelaide welcomed him as a hero. His appalling error of judgement, his disobedience to the Governor's order to return, the useless death of Baxter, were all forgotten. Eyre and Wylie had triumphed

Eyre, learning of disaster from Wylie, on the Nullarbor in 1841

8

The Myth Evaporates

Charles Sturt sat back in his chair and stared out the window. Pink and red geraniums bobbed and dipped in the summer breeze. He only saw tortured men dipping their oars into a remorseless river. What did he have to do to gain recognition? He had solved the riddle of the rivers. He had put forward the theories that Mitchell had ridiculed — and then found to be quite correct. He had done all that with a small group of men. Without shedding a drop of human blood. Now, here he was, gathering dust in the stuffy world of the public service.

Mitchell? Mitchell had been knighted. Sir Thomas Mitchell. Explorer.

Charles . . . darling. Your dinner's going cold.

Sturt turned to face his wife. His eyes filled with tears. *So is my career.*

Lady Franklin crossed Tasmania's rugged west with her husband Sir John in 1842. The Franklins helped by a team of convicts were guided by James Calder, an experienced bushman

Beating About The Bush 1840-44

By 1840 explorers and settlers were heading off into the bush in many parts of Australia. Their discoveries and settlements began to pile up. In 1840 Angus McMillan discovered Gippsland. Sheep and cattle stations sprang up on the Darling Downs. Count Paul Edmond de Strzelecki climbed a high peak in the Australian Alps and named it Kosciusko — after one of his Polish countrymen.

Dr. Edward Barker, Edward Hobson and Albert Brodribb blazed a trail from Melbourne to newly-discovered Gippsland.

And in 1842 Australia's first woman explorer, Lady Jane Franklin, stood on the bank of a swollen river in Tasmania and watched as her husband, Sir John, supervised the construction and launch of a rough canoe. When the log canoe wallowed its way across the stream they rode it together — and became the first canoeists on the Franklin River.

They had come to the river near the end of their journey from Hobart to Macquarie Harbour. The trip took them from the east coast to the west. They had crossed high, rugged, dangerous country, deeply gashed by steep ravines. Wet country: dampened by swirling fogs, drenched by torrential rain. Scoured by racing rivers and chilled by icy frosts. Country covered in gloomy, dripping forests. But Lady Jane went cheerfully with her husband. And a team of convict porters who carried her vast load of personal belongings. She went most of the way on a palanquin carried by two convicts over a narrow mountain track through dense scrub.

In the next year, 1843 South Australia's salt-lake barrier was attacked by Captain Frome. He failed to break through.

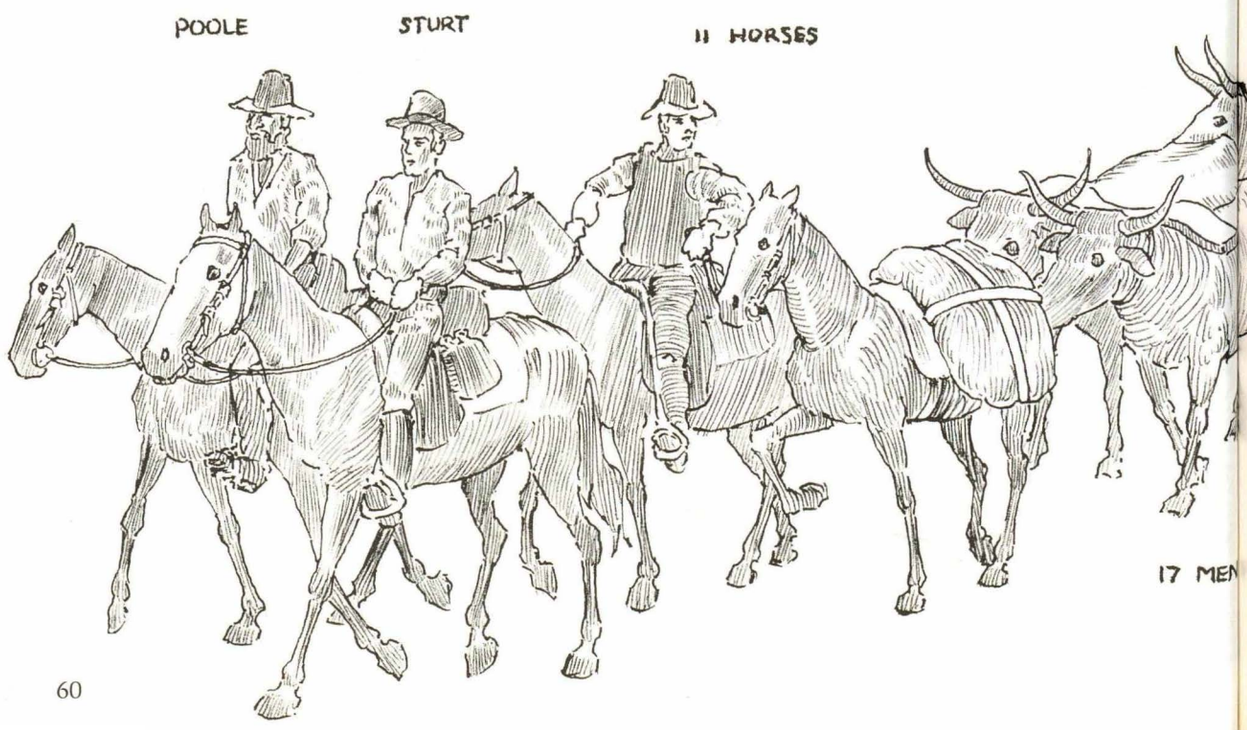
Surveyor John Horrocks might have succeeded. He headed for the western side of Lake Torrens with a camel — the first to be used in Australian exploration. But Horrocks accidentally shot himself dead.

Meanwhile two old rival explorers were preparing dramatic comebacks.

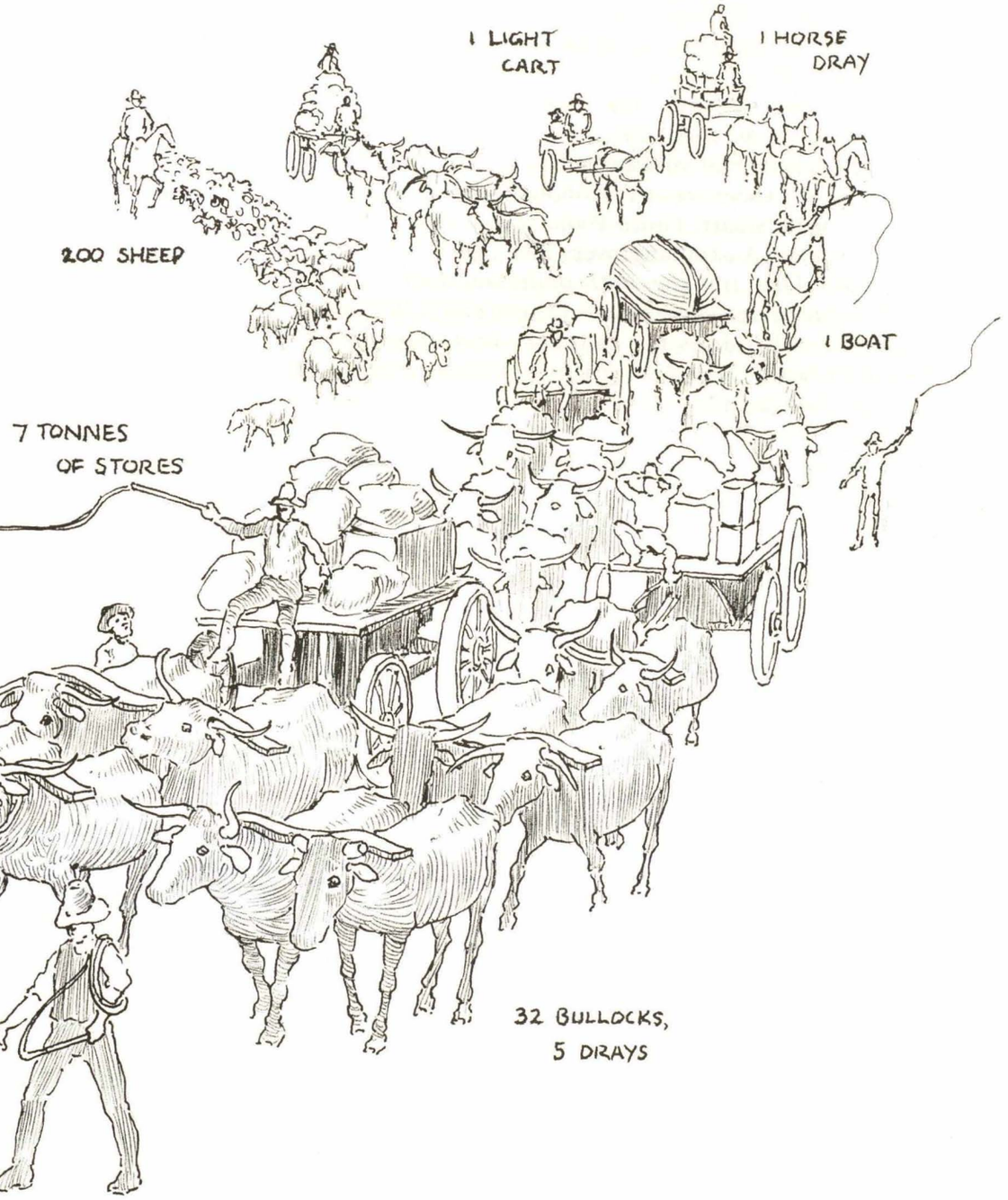
Sturt Starts Again

Financial problems. Refused promotion. Forced to endure life as a poorly paid public servant. Charles Sturt was desperate. What he needed was one more great discovery. One adventure that would make him a hero again. What? Where?

Sturt's expedition to central Australia. It makes a fine example of a well equipped and supplied venture. Sturt believed in large scale expeditions, but some other explorers like Eyre and Stuart set out with small lightly loaded parties



Well, why bother with a choice? He decided to go out and visit every unexplored corner of the continent. His hopeful estimate for the time he'd need? Two years.



His wife looked into his sad face. She knew it was impossible. Sturt was nearly fifty. His sight was poor. He wasn't as fit as he used to be. But she couldn't tell him. The Colonial Secretary didn't think it was a good idea either . . . *but if you'd like to go looking for the inland sea in the centre of the continent . . .*

Sturt clapped his thin bony hands with delight. *HA! There's life in the old man yet!*

Three hundred men volunteered to join him. He chose sixteen. One of them was an alcoholic Scottish draftsman, John McDouall Stuart. James Poole was Sturt's second in command. South Australian Governor George Grey gave him a union Jack. *Plant it in the centre of the continent, Captain Sturt.* Seventeen men, eleven horses, thirty two bullocks, two hundred sheep, five drays, two carts and a boat trooped out of Adelaide in August 1844. *You have to have a boat if you want to explore the inland sea!*

Sturt had decided to follow his old track along the Murray and Darling rivers. *That's the way to skirt round those damned salt lakes, eh John?* — John Eyre nodded. He'd been appointed Protector of Aborigines on the Murray. He'd given up exploration — but he couldn't resist travelling a short way along the river with Sturt.

An ominous sign. The Darling was almost dry. But there was rich grass growing along their track. Off to the north west a low range of distance-blued hills caught Sturt's eye. He sent Poole and Stuart off to check them out. *Climb them and tell me what lies beyond them.*

They came back with good news. Poole had seen ". . . a sea extending along the horizon . . . "

Sturt's spirits soared. "Tomorrow we start for the ranges, and then for the waters, the strange waters, on which boat never swam." Away from the river. North-west. Over the range of hills. One of them an unusual shape. "Broken Hill" Something glinting in the sun. Silver? No-one noticed. There was an inland sea to find.

The Heat Goes On

Poole had been fooled by a mirage. There was no sea beyond the range. There was very little water of any kind. They still worked their way north though. *Camp by water. Scout ahead until you find more. Move the camp up. Scout ahead. Move up.* It was getting hotter. It was getting dryer.

Ranks of ten metre high sandhills blocked their way. They slogged over them. Horses wilting. Bullocks weakening. Lip-splitting sun.

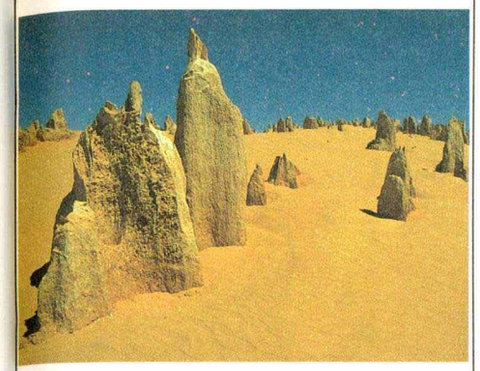
Then relief. A creek. Plenty of water. "Preservation Creek!" Permanent water?

Looks like it. Thank God!

Sturt called his camp there Depot Glen. He thought they'd stay there for a few days. Long enough to find more water on ahead. But the desert had trapped Sturt. Furnace-hot summer evaporated all the water holes for hundreds of kilometres around Depot Glen. Only this precious, shrinking water hole could support him. Only winter rains could release him — and they were six months away. If they were to come at all!

There was nothing to do but wait. Tormented by flies. Driven almost insane by boredom. Baked by heat . . . "under its effects every screw in our boxes had been drawn . . . horn handles and combs split . . .The lead dropped out of our pencils . . . our hair . . . ceased to grow and our nails became brittle as glass."

They dug an underground shelter to try to escape the heat. A still, breathless oven. The water level dropped alarmingly. Sturt could hardly see. Poole was unwell and sank closer to his death.

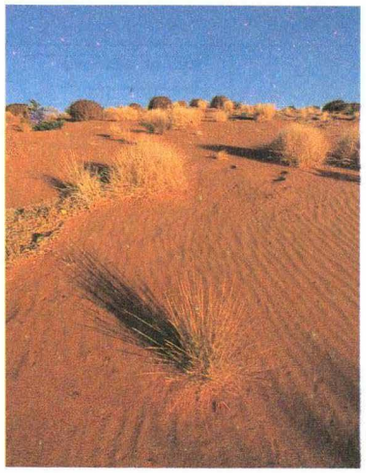


Lethal beauty

Brilliant colours. Startling landforms. Weird vegetation. The haunting landscapes of Australian deserts display a beauty which everybody can recognise. But to the explorers who first came to them they brought tortures of thirst and hunger and the terrifying threat of death.

George Grey staggered through the Pinnacles (top) on his desperate trek southward to Perth. He was too preoccupied with his life and the lives of the men he'd left behind, to take pleasure in his discovery.

The deserts of central Australia (bottom) trapped Charles Sturt for months during his final expedition. All his dreams of finding a fertile interior were shattered in their grip and he nearly lost his life there.



Cold Comfort

July, 1845. Dawn. Sturt rolled over in his blankets. He was cold and stiff. Sand gritted between his teeth. Ice-winds had been blasting the camp all night. He wondered how Poole was doing. A few days earlier he'd gambled on rain falling south of Depot Glen and sent some of the men back with Poole. One last desperate attempt to save Poole's life.

Sturt opened his eyes and stared up into grim, grey overcast. He sniffed. A strange smell in the air. One of the horses whinnied. *Rain?* He rolled further over and glanced to the west. Low, black clouds were creeping across the plain towards the camp. Low black clouds with ragged bottoms dragging on the ground! *RAIN! IT'S GOING TO RAIN!* Big spots spattered on Sturt's face. Cold spots. Wonderful cold spots. They could go home! Or they could go on . . . *We'll push on. Straight away.* Then the men Sturt had sent south with Poole came back. Poole was dead.

A grave was scraped out by the creek. Sturt read from his Bible. Poole was wrapped in a blanket and lowered to his final resting place. Five men were sent back to Adelaide for fresh stores. Sturt climbed into the saddle. *Let's go. Be careful with that boat. It will float in the inland sea yet!*

Sturt tried to find the inland sea all winter. He found a lake. About one hundred kilometres north of Depot Glen. *We'll base ourselves here.* Fort Grey. Then they cast about. Looking for a way into the centre of Australia, looking for that inland sea. First to the west. They were stopped dead by salt lakes and came back to Fort Grey. Then Sturt headed north with four men. A ride into a dry stony desert. *Where will we find water, Captain Sturt?*

I don't know. We'll have to rely on it raining. The rain never came but they still pushed on. Over a wide creek. *"Cooper's Creek"* — named after a friend. On and on, 650 kilometres from Fort Grey. Men and horses blind and sick. *Turn back.*

There were loose stones everywhere. Painful joltings whenever a horse stumbled. *If I fall off, I'll never get back on again.* Metre by metre. Step by step. Back to Fort Grey.

Still Sturt wouldn't give up. He took his last chance. *C'mon Stuart. Back to the Cooper. Follow it a way. Now turn north.* Blocked by more stony desert, they went back to the Cooper and followed it east. *It's disappeared into the plains. Turn back. Head for Fort Grey. Quickly.* No water left.

Fort Grey was deserted. The lake had died and turned into revolting slime. The men he'd left there had retreated to Depot Glen. Men and horses slurped down the slime, then turned south for the desperate race back to Depot Glen.

Sturt was almost senseless from scurvy when they got there. But there was no time to waste. Summer's searing hand was starting to grip the country again. They had to reach the Darling River, quickly. Very quickly. *Kill some bullocks and turn their hides into water bags.* Each bloated bullock-hide held about as much as fifty twelve-litre jerrycans. One more thing. *Launch the boat in the creek before we go.*

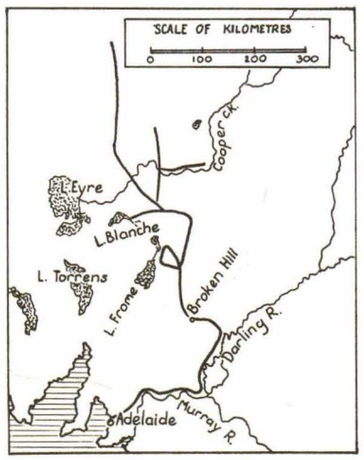
Sturt forced himself upright in the saddle. The heat of the day wanted to press him down, crush him. But he straightened up, sick and giddy. He wanted to see that boat floating. It slipped into the water; rocked a little and drifted slowly away.

When it gently bumped into the trees on the other side of the creek Stuart spurred his horse up and touched Sturt's arm. Looked at his cracked lips and scurvy-rotten gums. *Are ye ready, sir?*

Sturt nodded and turned his back on the creek — and his dream of an inland sea. He was carried into his house in Adelaide in January, 1846. He'd been away for seventeen months. Shock stunned his wife when she saw him. She fainted and fell in a heap on the floor.

Sturt's Expedition 1844-46

salt lakes

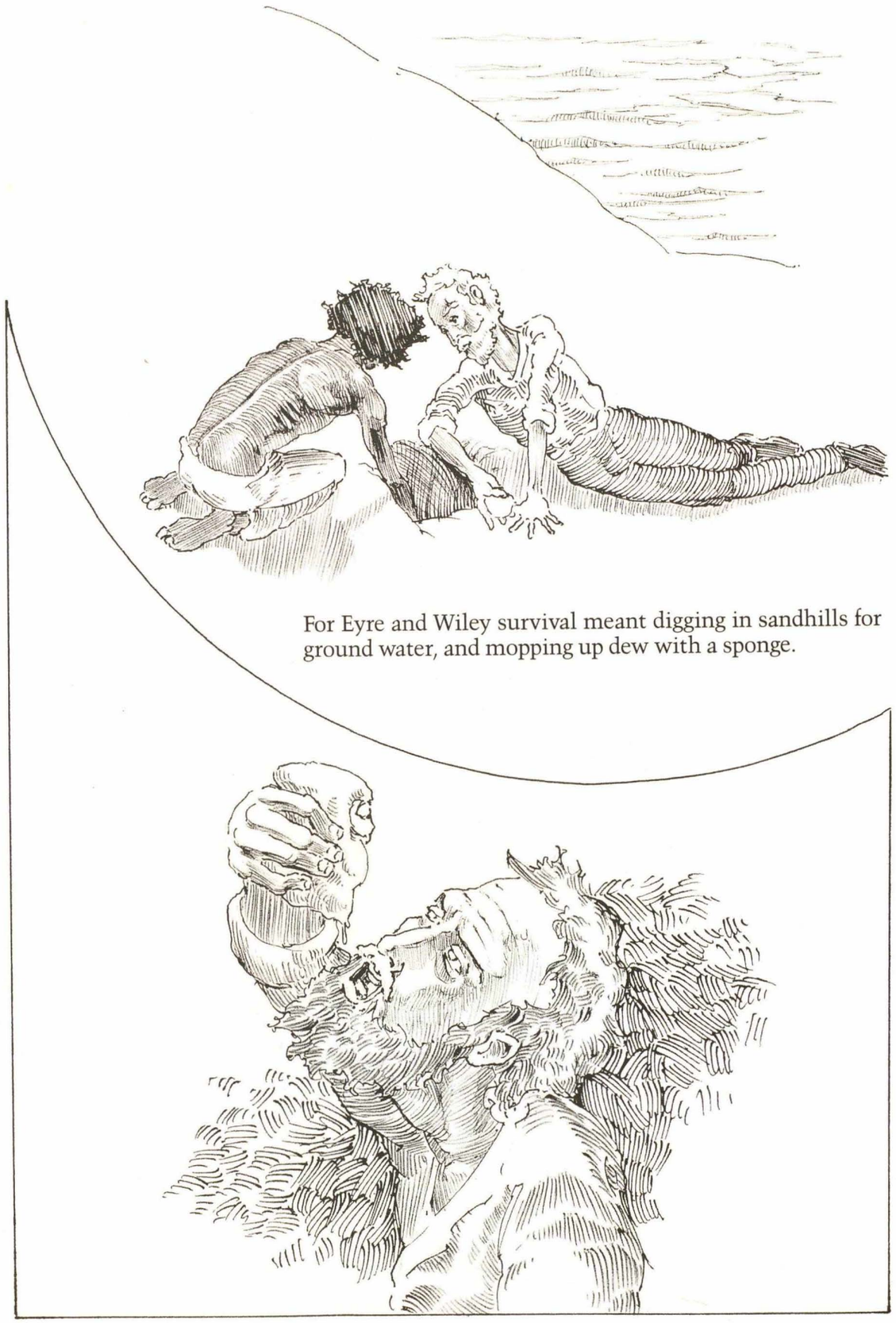


Thirst

The desperate search for water kept Australia's explorers busy. Charles Sturt scouts well ahead of his main party to find water supplies for them to camp by on their way to the Centre.

Ernest Giles quenches his thirst at a puddle.

Perhaps earlier explorers would have been less thirsty if they'd used the method pioneered by David Carnegie who traversed the centre of Western Australia in the 1890s. He trapped an Aborigine and drove him wild with thirst by feeding him salted meat. Then he let him go and followed him to his precious secret supply.



For Eyre and Wiley survival meant digging in sandhills for ground water, and mopping up dew with a sponge.

Ludwig? Ludwig? Where Is Ludwig?

Ludwig Leichhardt had no intention of joining the German Army. Not if he could help it. National Service was compulsory but only if the Army could find you. *Australia will be far enough away. They'll never find me there.*

When the recruiting officers knocked on the door of his Berlin home they found him gone. He was declared a deserter. He landed in Australia in 1842. By 1844 he had done two amazing things. He had convinced everybody that he was a doctor — although he wasn't. And he had become the leader of a major expedition. He was going to find a route between Brisbane and the new settlement at Port Essington on the north coast.

It was a private expedition. Leichhardt had scrounged the funds and stores for it from merchants and landowners. *If we find any good country, I'll tell you about it first.* He had no experience as an explorer or a bushman. And he chose seven other inexperienced men and boys to go with him. Leichhardt's eighth man was the one exception. John Gilbert was a fine bushman. He'd travelled widely in Australia, collecting birds, plants and animals for his boss, John Gould. Work that he'd done exceptionally well.

Over 3 000 kilometres lay ahead of them when the group wandered out from Jimbour Station on the Darling Downs in October 1844. Nine men, seventeen horses. Sixteen bullocks, not much food. Leichhardt's plan was to head north from Jimbour and stay reasonably close to the coast. It didn't take long for them to get into difficulty. Thick scrub caused the first major problems. Gilbert had seen the scrub on the previous day. *It's too thick to drive the bullocks and horses through Dr. Leichhardt. We should go round it.*

I am the leader Mr. Gilbert. Press on. It was like walking into a barbed-wire entanglement. Dark dank scrub, fallen trees, thick bushes, slippery logs, clinging vines. A thousand spiky branches, poking, pulling, gouging, tearing clothes. Tearing flesh and snagging bullocks' horns.

Straps breaking. Loads falling. Horses bolting. Evidence of their blunder all over the ground. Scattered tools and instruments. Everybody was too busy trying to keep control of the animals to worry about picking them up. And worst of all spidery white trails of flour were pouring from torn flour

bags and mingling with the mud. About seventy kilograms of it. Food that they would desperately need.

Leichhardt and his men blundered on. As weeks dragged past they fell further and further behind schedule. Near the Mackenzie River they took a week to travel twenty kilometres. Not that the country was very difficult but because Leichhardt left the main group and got lost!

Leichhardt might have been lost, but he was determined not to starve to death. He and one Aboriginal companion shared two pigeons and a lizard. Leichhardt ate his share of the birds and then the bones and feet as well. And the lizard? Well English buccaneer William Dampier had tried to eat the same kind of lizard more than 150 years before. Dampier had a strong stomach — and he often needed it — but he couldn't force one of these lizards down . . . "both the looks and the smell of them being so offensive." Leichhardt ate one and licked his fingers afterwards.

Ludwig Leichhardt at the start of his first expedition in 1844. He headed straight into dense sub-tropical scrub in inland Queensland. This slowed progress and valuable stores were lost. Later many other difficulties hampered them. But Leichhardt and most of his men managed to reach Port Essington, over a year after setting off

Relief came after four and a half days when they spied some familiar bush. They were soon back on the right track — for the time being!

Revenge?

Leichhardt refused to believe that the local Aborigines might be dangerous. John Gilbert knew they could be. Leichhardt wouldn't listen. A fatal flaw — but not for Leichhardt. Not yet anyway . . .

Seven o'clock. Dinner was over. Daylight faded. Darkness sifted through the bush. Time for a smoke. Time to enjoy the solitude of Cape York. Time to forget the rigours and torments of the day. Time for sleep. Gilbert finished writing his diary up with some remarks about the local Aborigines' customs. He closed the book and slipped it into his saddle-bags. *Goodnight Dr. Leichhardt.*

Goodnight Mr. Gilbert. Flickering firelight fading and dying.

What's that..? Who's there? . . . Whose thAAAAGGGGH. It was Roper, one of the men, speared. Five more shafts whistled in and thudded into his body. Calvert stopped another five. Miraculously they still lived. In came a yelling swarm of Aborigines, swinging clubs, smashing, battering the speared men.

More spears. Explorers running for their guns. Screams of agony from Roper and Calvert. The guns were unloaded. *No need to worry!*

But Gilbert warned you Dr. Leichhardt.

Gilbert sprang out of his bed. Straight into the path of a wildly thrown spear. It killed him.

At last, loaded guns. Frantic shots. Lead slamming into the attackers. Hideous screams. Then quiet. They'd gone. Roper and Calvert still lived. Horribly injured.

An unusual attack. At night. Revenge? Some of the explorers molesting Aboriginal women? Perhaps. Whatever the reason, the best man in the expedition lay dead because of it. *An awful way to learn a lesson Doctor.*

Back From The Dead

You have to hand it to Leichhardt though. He couldn't navigate. Couldn't lead men. Couldn't shoot. Didn't understand the Aborigines. But he discovered most of the northern rivers. The Burdekin, MacKenzie, Suttor, Mitchell, Dawson and many more. He opened up wide areas of fertile land. And he pioneered a route from Brisbane to Port Essington. Not the most direct route — his poor navigation made sure that couldn't be done — but a route nevertheless.

Leichhardt couldn't prove that he was the doctor he claimed to be either — but Roper and Calvert were still alive when the ragged procession lurched into Port Essington in December 1845. Leichhardt was probably as surprised at his success as anybody. Everyone in Australia thought he was dead. But he had fought his way through. He was back from the dead.

He became a hero. That was probably the worst thing that could have happened because Leichhardt promptly decided to head for the bush again. A hushed crowd in Sydney heard their hero's new plans . . . *Whatever happens I shall not leave Australia till I have crossed it!*

Explorers in the 18th and 19th Centuries lived on rough food — even when they had plenty of stores. When the stores ran out the explorers were often faced with a simple choice. Starve — or eat anything you can get your teeth into . . .

Even explorers close to Sydney were forced to eat unappetising meals. Watkin Tench and his men had to be satisfied with a skinny crow and some scraps of salt pork for tea as they struggled to find a path through the Blue Mountains.

There's not much meat on a shingleback lizard. Leichhardt adds bulk to his meal by eating the whole thing, head and all.

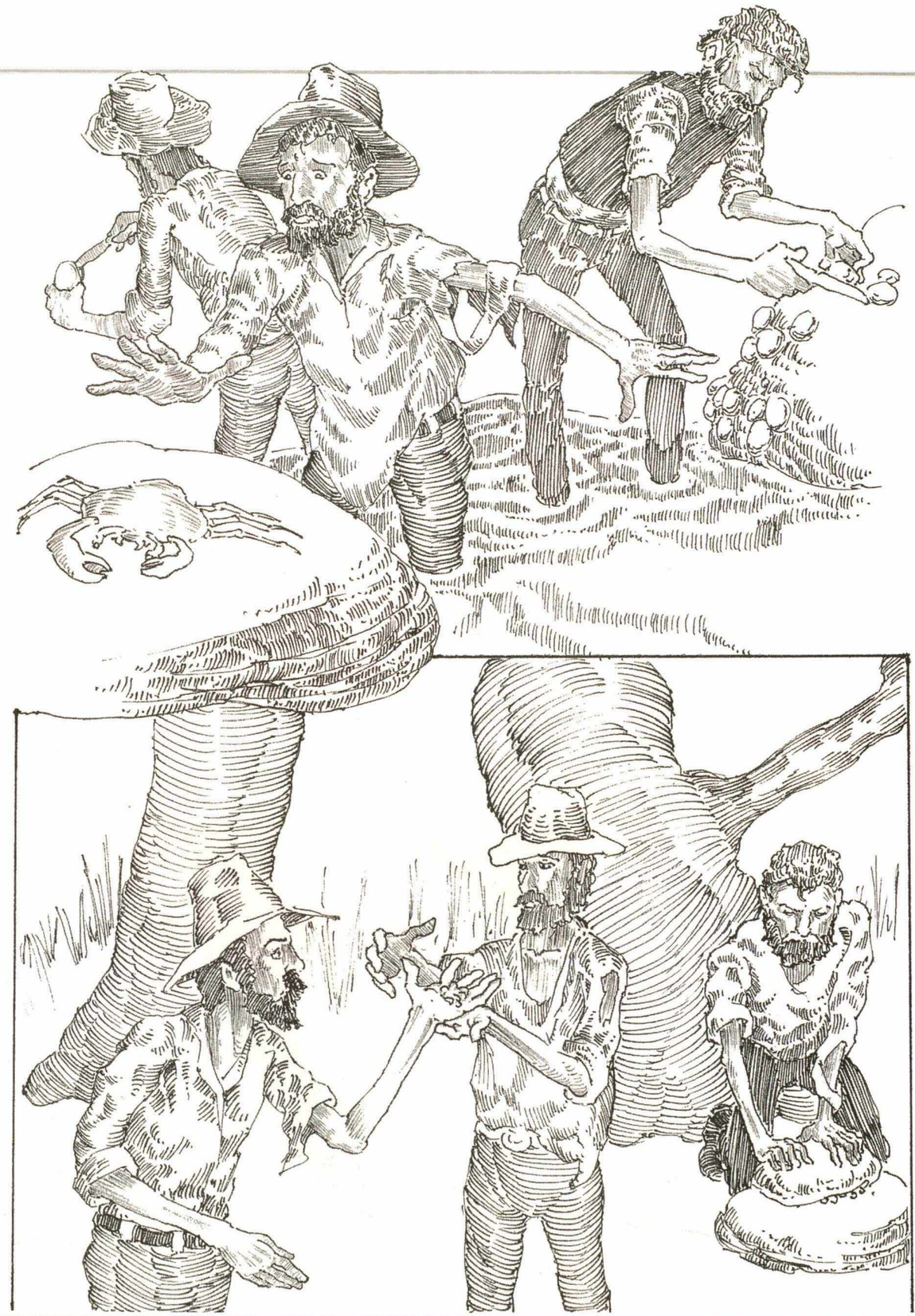
Explorers' Cookbook

By boiling them Ernest Giles found that horse skulls and hoofs could be turned into a "jelly that stank like rotten glue, and at breakfast . . . when this disgusting stuff was . . . coagulated, we would request one another with the greatest politeness to pass the gluepot!"

Peter Warburton and his men, who travelled from Alice Springs to the west coast in 1873, ate their camels. Camel hide wants "about forty eight hours continuous boiling and is then very good."

Giles again. This time alone, and on foot, in the Gibson Desert. He spotted a pathetic joey and pounced on it. He "ate it, living, raw, dying — fur, skin, bones, skull and all . . ." and now wishes he could eat the joey's parents too!

Horse-sweat adds spice to Stuart's meals of harness soup (spare harness boiled until the leather went soft enough to chew).



Abalone, barnacles and crabs ease Captain Bannister's hunger as he and his men battle along the south coast.

Food that kept Aborigines alive and well did little to help stranded Europeans. Burke and Wills ate as much nardoo as they could find — but they slowly died of starvation. Their bodies, used to different food, could not extract enough nutrition from the plant.

Beating About The Bush 1846 — 1858

Charles Sturt had seen his dream evaporate in the shimmering wastes of the Stony Desert. Now it was Sir Thomas Mitchell's turn. He still thought there was a mighty river or two flowing off to the north-west coast.

Governor Fitzroy gave him his chance late in 1845. While everyone thought Leichhardt was missing he set off to find a route from Sydney to Port Essington.

Mitchell hadn't been out long when a courier galloped up behind him. *Newspapers, sir. News of Leichhardt. He made it.* One of the newspapers declared that "Australia Felix and the discoveries of Sir Thomas Mitchell now dwindle into comparative insignificance."

Mitchell prodded his horse into a trot. *We'll see.* Success came with the discovery of the fertile Maranoa district. More useful land. Then west.

Mitchell's prayers were answered when he rode up and peered into a broad river flowing north west. "The watery road to the coast!" Mitchell stared along the stream. To the north-west. A river fit for a queen. "The Victoria!"

Absolutely no doubt! It runs to the coast. Creaking leather as he remounted. Drumming hoofs as he cantered off on top of the world.

Salt And Coal

Australia was humming. New discoveries were coming thick and fast.

Brothers, Augustus and Frank Gregory tramped out into arid areas east of Western Australia's pleasant farmlands in August, 1846. Salt lakes gave them plenty of trouble. Horses hoofs quickly punched through the brittle salt-crust into the bottomless, gluey mud underneath. *What we need are some wooden tracks for the horses to walk on!*

Back-breaking work. Chop wood. Cut it to length. Carry it back a kilometre to the bogged horses. Rope it together. Walk the horse to the end of the track. Bring up the next track. Over and over again. Four metres at a time.

Eventually the bogs forced them to turn north. Then they turned west and camped on the Irwin River. Their campfire was made from the first coal to be discovered in Western Australia. Two thick seams ran through the Irwin. Great news for the struggling colony.

Leichhardt set out again in 1846, determined to cross the continent from east to west. He was back eight months later after travelling only 600 kilometres. Disorganisation, squabbling, harassment from the Aborigines, bolting stock — it was all too much.

And Australia learned the truth about Mitchell's *Victoria* in 1847. Governor Fitzroy didn't actually doubt Sir Thomas but . . . *I think we'd better follow Sir Thomas's new river and see if it really does flow to the north coast. Send young Kennedy. Mitchell's second in command on the last trip . . .* It didn't take Kennedy long. Mitchell's *Victoria* suddenly turned south-west. It was the "Barcoo", a tributary of Sturt's Cooper's Creek. Sturt three; Mitchell nil.

Leichhardt And Kennedy: One Thing In Common

1848 was a fateful year. Time for Leichhardt to live up to his promise. Cross the continent from east to west.

But word had got around after the last expedition. Experienced men would not go with him. Leichhardt didn't give up though. He mustered six companions — more eager than wise — and marched west from the Darling Downs.

The entire expedition, every man and animal, vanished without trace.

Edmund Kennedy's time came too. He was sent north to find a route along the east coast of Cape York Peninsula. He was dropped in Rockingham Bay with twelve men, twenty eight horses, sheep, carts and supplies. Can you imagine trying to drive sheep and drag carts through thickly tangled mangrove swamps?

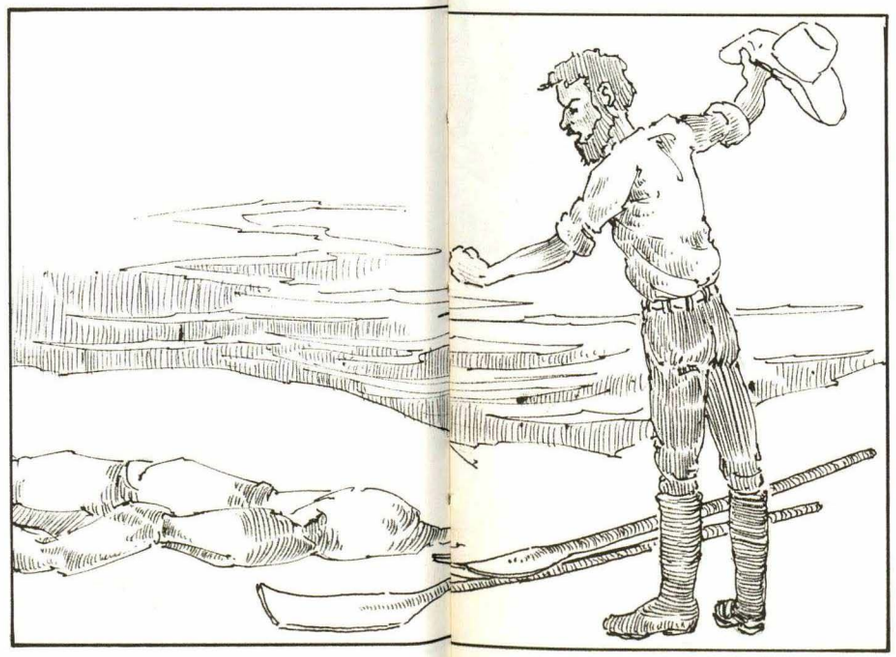
There was only one way out. Chop and hack a path through to the inland ranges. It took weeks. Horses were dying. So were sheep. Food was running out. Leeches. Heat. Stinging vines that could kill horses with pain and shock. Hostile Aborigines. Drenching rain. Quaking stinking mud, grabbing and holding their feet.

Kennedy made it to Weymouth Bay and left eight of the weakest men there. With the other four he intended to dash up to the tip of the Cape where a ship should be waiting for them. At Shelburne Bay one of his companions shot himself. Kennedy left two men with him and pressed on through the swamps and jungle with one man. Jacky Jacky, an Aboriginal.

Aborigines attacked. A spear sank deep into Kennedy's back. Rest at last . . . Jacky Jacky got through and met the ship. Told his story. Mentioned the men at Shelburne Bay and

Augustus Gregory had high hopes for the inflatable boats he took along in 1855. In fact they proved a time waster, because the intense north

Australian heat turned their waterproof adhesive into goo. Gregory lost hours trying to make them work



Weymouth Bay. There were no survivors at Shelburne Bay. Two at Weymouth. Thin skeletons waiting for the final rush of hostile Aborigines. Ten men dead.

Hovenden Hely had been with Leichhardt on his hopeless second expedition. He led a party west from the Darling Downs to look for Leichhardt's final expedition. Aborigines offered to show him where Leichhardt and his men had been massacred. Hely willingly followed — on a wild goose chase.

Hely found two trees, each carved with the letter "L". "L" for Leichhardt? He never found out.

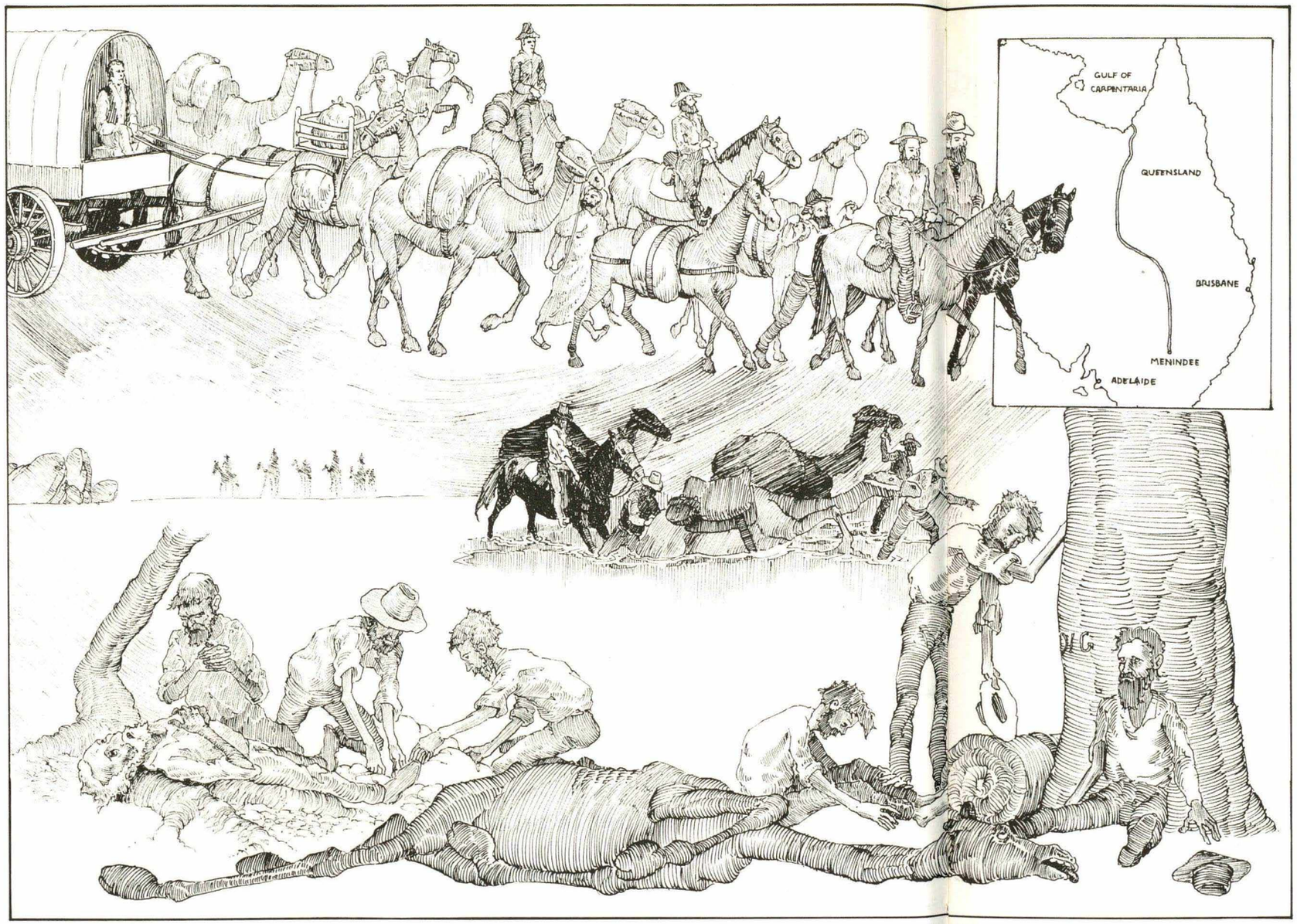
Augustus Gregory and Baron Von Mueller led an expedition through the north of Australia from the Victoria River in the Northern Territory to Port Curtis near Rockhampton in 1855. Amongst their equipment were two inflatable boats. Blowing them up would have been hard work in ideal conditions. But the intense heat of northern Australia perished the boats. They were unusable.

On their way they looked for signs of Leichhardt. Nothing.

Gregory was in the field again in 1858. Down the Barcoo, down the Cooper and on to Adelaide. On the way he searched for Leichhardt again. No trace, although he did form an opinion on what had happened. He believed that Leichhardt and his men ". . . favoured by thunder showers, penetrated the level desert country to the north west [of Cooper's Creek], in which case, on the cessation of the rain, the party would not only be deprived of water for the onward journey but unable to retreat as the shallow deposits of rainwater would evaporate in a few days.."

But they did see two old survivors from Sturt's 1844-45 expedition. Horses that had been lost and abandoned. Cooper's Creek had been kind to them for thirteen years.

Then in 1858 John McDouall Stuart, made his first attempt at crossing the continent from south to north. It was the first of several expeditions which found routes for the telegraph line that would link Australia to the world.



The story of Burke and Wills begins with the confident departure of their lavishly outfitted expedition. After delays along the way only four of them go on to complete the first south-north crossing of Australia. The tale ends tragically with the little group stranded in the centre

Whiff Of Success: Scent Of Death

Robert O'Hara Burke's diary: "Sunday, February 11th, 1861. It would have been well to say that we reached the sea, but we could not obtain a view of the open ocean, although we made every endeavour to do so..."

There's no beach where Irishman, Burke and Englishman, Wills reached the north coast. They didn't swim in clear tropical waters. Burke's horse didn't frolic in the shallows. They were near the mouth of the Bynoe River. There's just mangrove swamps. Impenetrable. Soaked in teeming rain.

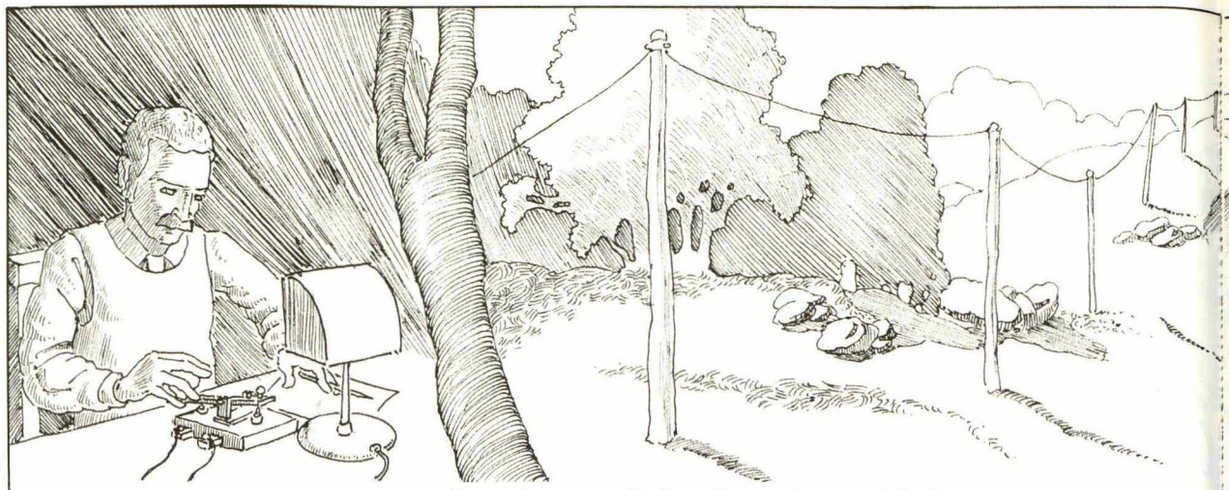
But they tasted seawater. Tiny waves creeping through the mangroves as the tide came in. They'd found a route for the telegraph line. But they were doomed. Everything was wrong.

Burke was no explorer. No bushman either. Nor could he lead men. The Victorian Exploration Committee chose him as leader of the most expensive expedition ever to set out in Australia. Eighteen men. Twenty four camels. Twenty two horses. Twenty tonnes of stores. Tens of thousands saw them off in August 1860. Squabbles, disorganisation and chaos quickly set in.

Burke turned his plans over in his mind as he rode. Stuart had to be beaten to the north. *Push on quickly to Cooper's Creek. Build a depot then dash for the coast before summer really heats things up. 2 400 kilometres round trip. We'll have a safe base to return to. Somewhere to rest up before we head back to Melbourne. In triumph!*

That was the plan. But Wright, the man in charge of the stores dragged his feet. Burke waited for six weeks on Cooper's Creek then impatiently began his dash without enough stores. Burke, Wills, Gray and King. One horse. Six camels carrying water and three months' food through pitiless desert in the scorching heat of December.

Two months to reach the coast. Two month's to get back? *Only one month's provisions left. Still we can always eat the camels.* Two months later they'd eaten four of the camels and Burke's skinny horse. Desperate now. Starving. Gray died. Bare hands scraping away the earth to make a grave. A whole fateful day to bury him. They were a day late getting back to the depot.



Tell The World Telegraph

Six months. At least, That's how long it took to get an answer to a letter posted in Australia and sent to someone in England. There was only one way for mail to travel — by sea.

Then, in 1844 Samuel Morse strung an electric wire between Washington and Baltimore in America. People watched and scratched their heads. *What's this guy doing?* Morse pulled up his chair. Flexed his fingers and pressed a button on a stout spring-loaded switch.

Righto. Watch this! BEEP BE BEEP BEEP. BEEEEEEEEEEP BE BEEP BEEEEEEEEEEP. Tiny pulses of electric current flashing down the wire. Down the other end sixty five kilometres away, a pencil, attached to another spring loaded switch twitched and jerked every time Morse tapped his button.

Every time the pencil moved it left a mark on a strip of paper. Dots and dashes ··· ––– ·· – ··· –– Morse Code.

Every group of dots and dashes represents a letter of the alphabet. Put them together. They form words. Messages. Transmitted down the wire at the speed of electricity; the speed of light. At that rate messages could travel from Australia to England in a fraction of a second!

Holy mackerel! We've got to get one of these Morse things.

Webs of telegraph wires soon spread round the world. Australia's first line went up in Victoria in 1854. Adelaide, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney were talking to each other over the wires by 1861. *Er . . . This is great, but it's still taking six months to get messages to and from England. What we need to do is connect Australia to the rest of the world by telegraph wire.* Waterproof telegraph cables had been developed. They were protected by a new high-tech material. Rubber. *All we do is bring a cable to our coast and plug it into our own network of wires.*

By 1860 the end of a telegraph cable was dangling free in Java. A place was needed to bring it ashore in Australia. *Somewhere on the north coast. Port Essington?*

The problem was, someone had to find a way to get the cable from the north coast to the south, if this Morse thing was going to bring information, business and wealth to Australia. The risks were enormous. But so were the rewards.

People in Adelaide and Melbourne both wanted those rewards. First to find a practical route to the north coast could have them. An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman started to make their plans.

Despair At The Depot

I can see the depot! Relief!

Relief? *Where is everyone? Where are the stores? Where?* Deserted. Wright had never arrived. Brahe, in charge of the depot while Burke was away had left that morning. If they hadn't lost a day burying a dead man....

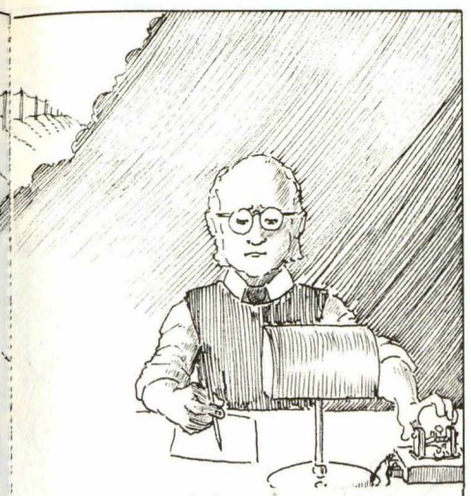
Look, on that tree! Deeply carved. They scraped away the dirt. DIG".

They found a few stores. Not enough to get them back to Medindie. So they set off down the Cooper towards Mount Hopeless. Well named. It was hopeless. The camels died. Stores gone. *Back to the depot.*

What do we do when we get there? No answer.

Brahe went back to the depot too. One last look. He didn't notice that his stores had been dug up. And he didn't stay long enough to see the walking skeletons staggering back up the creek. *It's no good. They haven't come back. They're dead.*

Burke and Wills soon were. King lived to be rescued.



Canny Scot; Can He Do It?

Scotsman, John McDouall Stuart, was Adelaide's hope. He'd been with Sturt in the desert. Then, from 1858, he'd led expeditions out into the wilds of South Australia. Crossing the continent south to north was his dream.

In 1860 he'd reached the centre of the continent and planted a flag on a mountain. "Central Mount Sturt" he'd called it. "Central Mount Stuart" the mapmaker put on the maps. Poor Sturt. Couldn't even get his *name* into the centre of the continent!

Furious Aborigines and fearful drought had forced Stuart back to Adelaide from his expeditions in 1860 and 1861. The September 1861 return was an embarrassment. Victoria's contenders in the telegraph race, Burke and Wills, were well on their way to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Stuart was a weedy little man. But he was fearless. And determined to reach that north coast. In September the grinding dry heat of the red centre had made him suffer terribly. One month later, he hurled himself back into the teeth of a murderous outback summer. Nothing but Death would stop him this time.

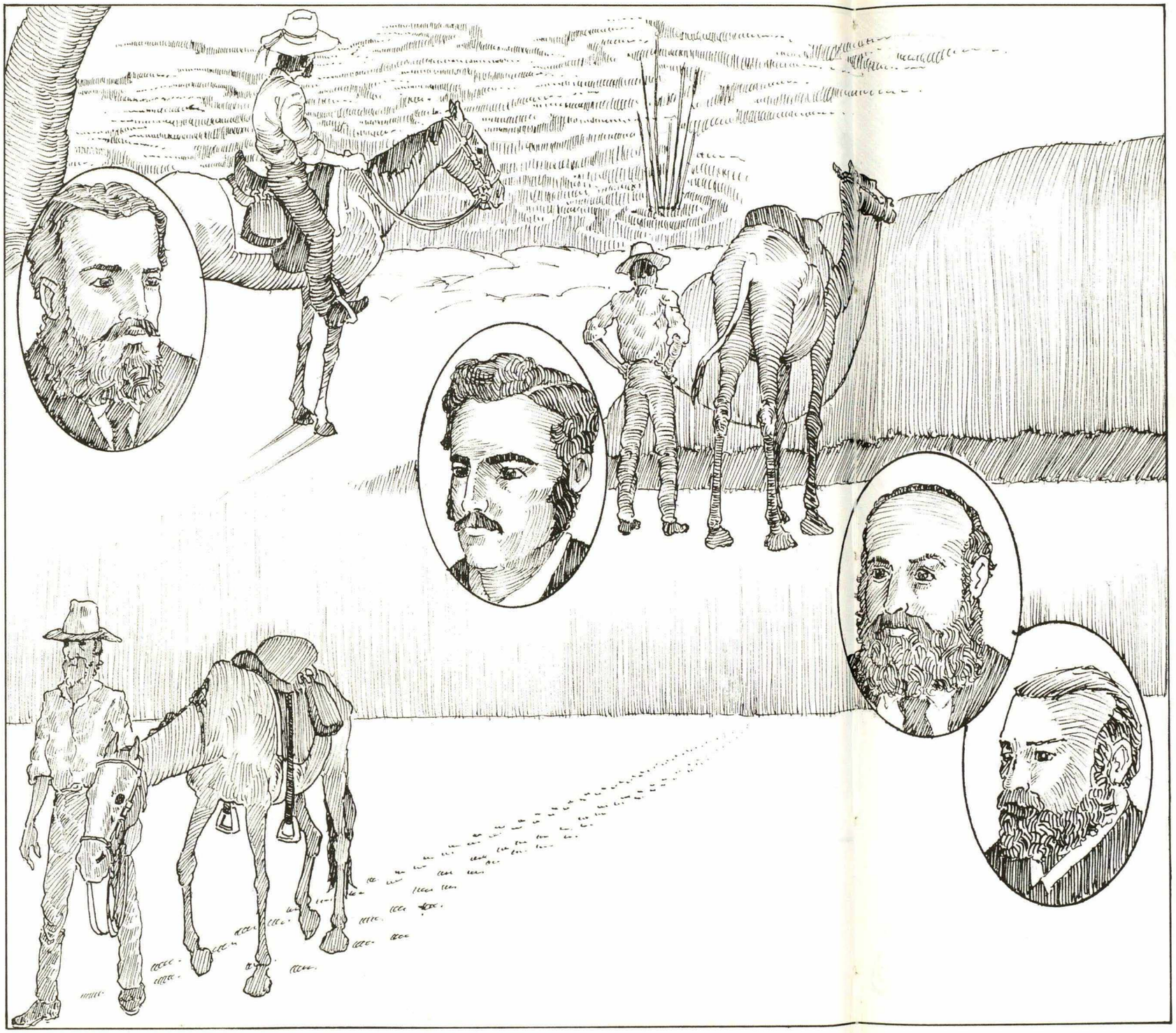
His plan was always to travel light. He'd seen Sturt bogged down by the sheer size of his expedition. *Travel light. Travel quick. Aye, that's the trick! Get there and back afore anyone knows ye've been away!*

Then the news about Burke and Wills. The race was over. Their skeletons were bleaching on the banks of Cooper's Creek — but they'd made it to the shores of the Gulf before they died. Stuart had been beaten. He wouldn't be first to reach the north coast. *But I will be the first to get there and back. Aye!* So ten men turned and headed north. Few provisions. Not even a medicine chest. Stuart's right hand in bandages. Crushed by a stamping horse.

A year later they rode back. They told how they'd suffered terribly. Long dry stretches. Horses abandoned to their agonising fate. Scurvy. Then marshes and swamps. *How will they ever push a telegraph line through here?*

At last the sea! Chambers Bay on the north coast.

Stuart had suffered so badly on the homeward trek that he couldn't ride his horse. His companions made him a stretcher and dragged him along behind a horse. Scurvy rotted his gums. He could only eat flour boiled in water. He went blind. But South Australia had a route for the telegraph line.



TOP: John Forrest, the great Western Australian explorer. MIDDLE: William Gosse, the first explorer to lead a party to Ayers Rock. BOTTOM: Giles and Gibson (portrayed at the right). Mystery surrounds Gibson's disappearance in the desert named after him (left)

Beating About The Bush 1861 — 1885

There was a lot happening in 1861. Frank Gregory discovered the Hammersley Ranges and the Fortescue, Ashburton, De Grey and Oakover Rivers in Western Australia. Alf Howitt, one of many explorers searching for the Burke and Wills party, found John King, the only survivor. Aborigines had helped King gather food. Nardoo — a grass seed which they pounded into flour — fish and birds. Their own bodies could extract nourishment from bush-tucker like this. Europeans could not. King was slowly starving to death. "Another three days would have been too late" said Howitt's Dr. Wheeler.

John Jardine established Somerset, a tiny settlement on Cape York in 1863. A year later, his sons, Frank and Alexander, charged overland to the settlement with a great mob of cattle from Bowen in Queensland. In a pitched battle on the way they killed thirty Aborigines.

John Forrest tramped around the Bight from Perth to Adelaide in 1870. He probed north of the coast and found some better country but no permanent water.

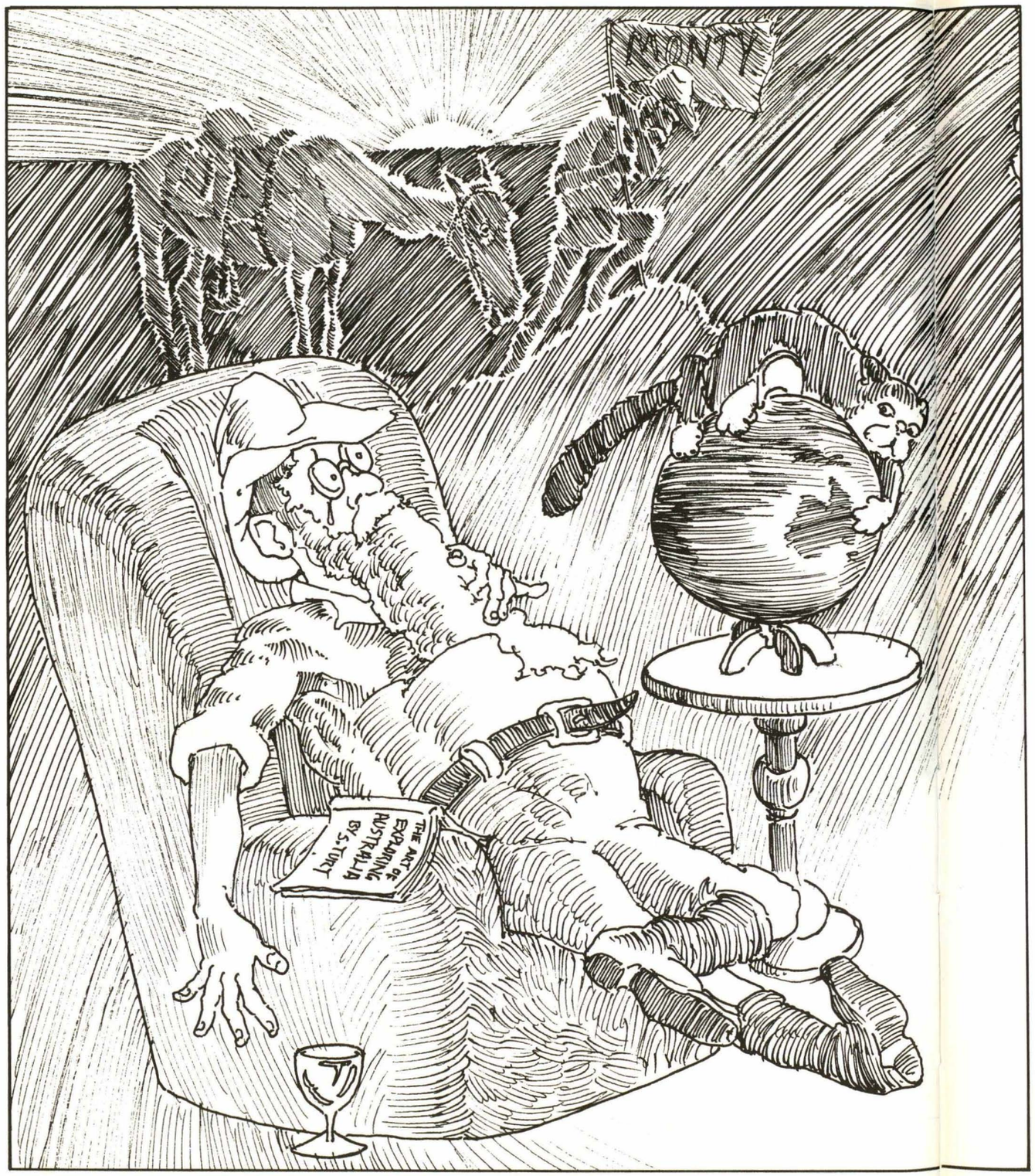
Ernest Giles set out in 1872. *From the telegraph line to Perth!* That was his intention. Lake Amadeus and unwilling companions stopped him. He'd seen Ayers Rock and the Olgas in the distance though. The first European to see them.

In 1873 Giles went into the heart of the desert west of Alice Springs. Two men, Giles and Gibson, pushed west from their camp searching for water so that the rest of the expedition could move up. No water. One horse alive out of four. No chance for either of them. Unless . . . *You take the horse Gibson. Get back to camp. Ride back with fresh horses and water. I'll walk on as best I can.*

Er . . . I'm not sure of the way back.

Just follow our tracks, man. Don't leave them! Gibson did leave them. He was never seen again. His bones are still in that desert. The Gibson Desert. Giles walked back alone. One hundred and forty kilometres on five litres of water.

William Gosse set out from Alice Springs looking for grazing land in 1873. He found some — and became the first European to visit Ayers Rock and the Olgas. John Forrest crossed from the Murchison River in Western Australia to the overland telegraph line. Giles tried again and went from the overland telegraph line to Perth — and just to prove it wasn't a fluke, back again.



Alexander Forrest discovered the Ord and Margaret Rivers in the Kimberleys, and opened this luxuriant corner of the country to graziers. In 1883 the Durack family mustered 8 000 starving cattle on Cooper's Creek and overlanded them to the banks of the Ord. Two and a half years on the trail.

The list goes on and on. By 1885 a reasonably accurate idea of the interior had been formed. The age of heroic expeditions and startling discoveries had passed.

Epilogue

1885, late at night. Somewhere in an Australian city, Montague Brown sat and sighed. Spread out on his polished wood dining table was a map of Australia — crisscrossed with the winding tracks of all Australia's explorers. Hundreds of them. Montague was looking for an area to explore.

There were a lot of blank spaces on the map. But no areas of real mystery. The continent had been crossed and recrossed. East to west. West to east. Montague didn't want just to fill in fine details. That was important work but Montague wanted something more exciting. He'd read about Sturt and Stuart, Forrest, Eyre and Mitchell. That was the sort of work he wanted to do.

Montague wanted to lead a major expedition. Make a spectacular discovery. But where? The inland sea? That myth had been shot to pieces. A huge river flowing across the continent to the north coast? That had been sunk too.

Judging by the map, most of the good grazing and farming land had been found too. Routes for roads and railways?

That was a possibility — but it wasn't really what he had in mind. *No, there's nothing out there for me. It's all been done.* Australia's early explorers had done their work well. Montague's chair scraped on the floor as he pushed it back and stood up.

Fold the map; rustling paper. Blow out the lamp; curling sooty smoke. Darkness. Moonlight through the window. Off to bed. Cool sheets. Soft pillow. Ticking clock . . .

. . . Out in the bush. Past the round grey rocks. Over the dry creek. In the little clearing. Moaning wind. Bushes bending and tossing. Drifting sand. Moonlight shining on something silver. Half-buried. An old pocket-watch. Engraved. *To Dearest Ludwi . . .*

Montague was wrong. There are still mysteries out there. Waiting for an explorer to uncover them.

The publishers are grateful for the help they have received in obtaining the following illustrations and for permission to use them:
p. 62-63 top: Wade Hughes Pty. Ltd. Photograph by the author.
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EXPLANATORY NOTES

EAST INDIAMAN: (p. 51) European trading ship which sailed to Asia or the South Sea Islands for one of the large companies which managed commercial empires there.

PLACE NAMES: Some of the places mentioned in this book have been known by more than one name, or have had their names altered since they were visited by explorers. The most important examples are:

Cooper's Creek — Cooper Creek
Geelong Bay — Corio Bay
Hume River — Murray River
Spencer's Gulf — Spencer Gulf
Van Diemen's Land — Tasmania

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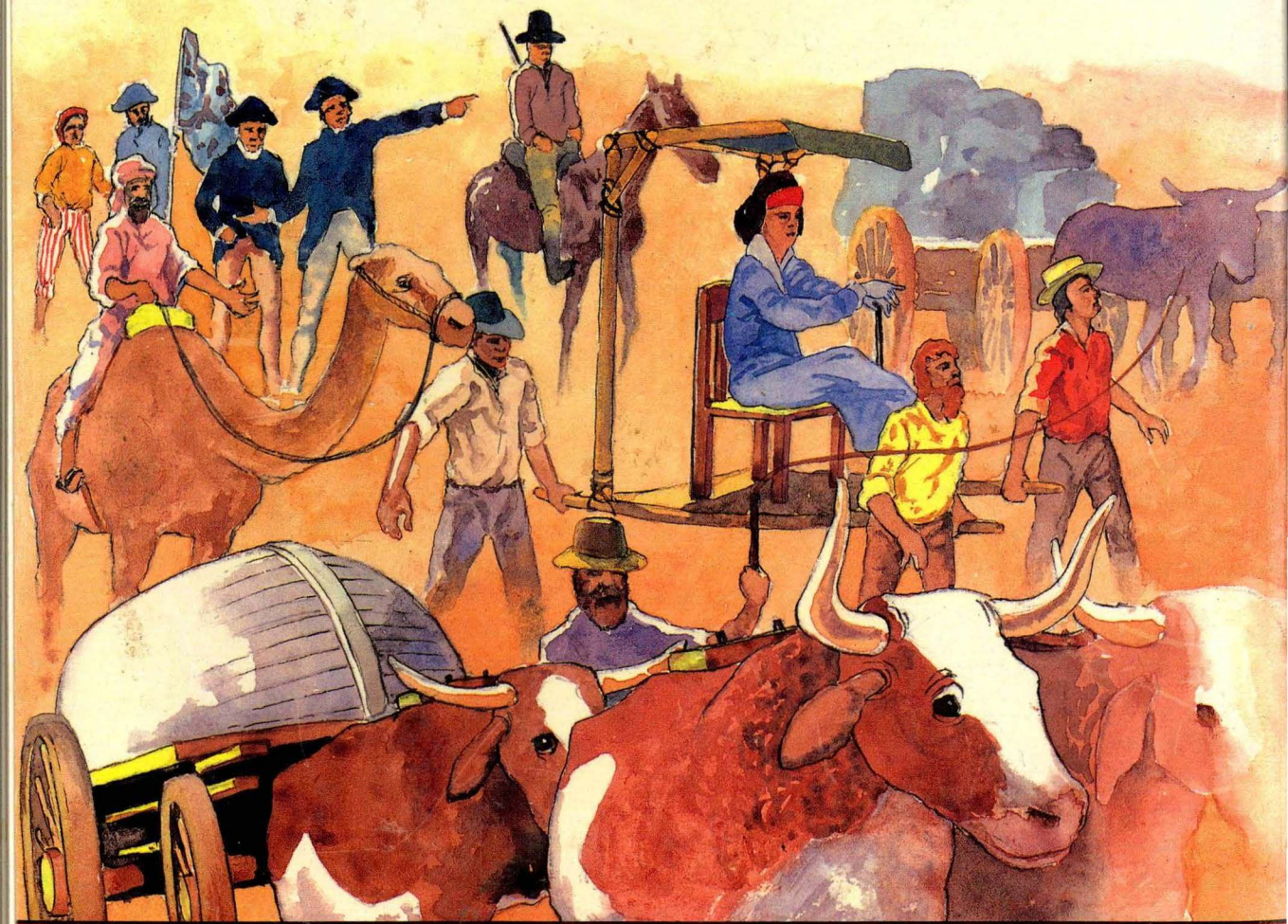

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