One of the major criticisms of the Burke and Wills Expedition is that they failed to take advantage of the Aboriginal people’s considerable knowledge and skills, which had enabled them to survive the harsh conditions of the Australian outback for thousands of years.

The explorers’ unwillingness to learn from the Aboriginal people ultimately led to their deaths, while the only remaining member of the advance party, John King, survived primarily because he was cared for by the Yandruwandha people.
By 1860, nearly two-thirds of Australia remained unexplored:

The desert remained oblivious to nearly a century of European colonisation. Its indigenous inhabitants lived and died as they always had done, and on the banks of the Cooper Creek, the old coolabah trees stood unmolested, their roots responding to the floods and droughts that had dictated the rhythms of the interior for thousands of years. But the tranquillity would not last forever. (Murgatroyd, 2002, p18)

Aboriginal culture

By the time the expedition reached Swan Hill they had travelled across the lands of no less than five different Aboriginal groups in only three weeks. However, only the biologist and artist Ludwig Becker paid any attention to the traditional owners of the land, noting down scraps of their language, their songs and customs.

After 56 days on the road, the expedition reached Menindee. This placed them on the southern edge of the Western Catchment and approaching what was known as desert country, with no tracks or signposts ahead and only the wisdom of the local Aboriginal people for assistance. However, Burke and Wills had a European-based distrust for the Aboriginal people they encountered on their trip and continually refused their help.

While Wills wrote that he found the Aboriginal people “remarkably welcoming” (Murgatroyd, p187) and appreciated the gifts of food they brought, both he and Burke failed to learn about the Aboriginal ways and were somewhat condescending towards their traditions.

Wills’ journals noted his surprise that they did not see more Aboriginal people, without realising that they were being followed for most of their journey by “a network of well-camouflaged messengers” (Murgatroyd, p187). In failing to take the time to earn the trust of the Aboriginal people, Burke and Wills’ eventual requests for guidance were unsuccessful, despite the mirrors and beads they offered for enticements.

In the end, it was their unwillingness to learn from the Aborigines that contributed to their deaths. As Jonathan King wrote (The Age, 2010):

Biting the hand of friendship almost to the last, Wills described these tribes as “mean-spirited and contemptible in every respect”. Admittedly he changed his tune when the Aboriginal people were his only source of food while he was dying of malnutrition, but even then he wrote: “I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months.”

In the end, by repeatedly refusing to reframe their attitudes towards Aboriginal people, the explorers sealed their own fate. Robert O’Hara Burke and William John Wills died of malnutrition beside Cooper Creek in this Aboriginal land of plenty where the Yandruwandha people had lived for thousands of years. Only one member of the party, John King, who joined the Aboriginal people, survived to tell the tale.

As the last man standing, the Aboriginal people took pity on King and allowed him to live with them. At this late point in the trip, he learnt important skills like building a gunyah, in return for providing first aid treatment and shooting birds for his hosts (Phoenix, 2006).

Food

When the expedition had travelled only 400 km, Burke realised they were overloaded. At Balranald, he offloaded some of their most valuable cargo. Some of the items he sold had been unnecessary from the start, but others were more valuable than he realised - like the supply of lime juice that was important in preventing scurvy.
for word from Melbourne in the unrelenting heat, the men became too exhausted to fish or hunt. Out of credit at the store in Menindee, their vitamin-deficient diet was based on flour, sugar, tea and a small amount of dried beef. It soon started to impact on their health and caused medical problems later on the journey (Murgatroyd, p159).

Late in their trip, Burke and Wills did learn about nardoo, which was readily available and offered to them by the Aboriginal people. They used to grind the nardoo seeds to a powder and add water to form an edible dough. Unbeknown to the explorers, the nardoo ‘spore cases’ contain thiaminase which depletes the body of thiamine. According to Jonathan King’s observations (The Age, 2010):

The basic food staple nardoo kept the explorers alive for months, and could have sustained them indefinitely - had they learnt how to prepare it so it did not cause beriberi (a deficiency of thiamine, vitamin B1), from which they died.

The Aboriginal people ate a nourishing diet in good seasons and managed to survive on what nature provided in dry times. However, harvesting bush tucker takes knowledge, skill and patience – qualities historians do not attribute to Burke – a man who “had come to conquer, not to learn”. (Murgatroyd, p151).

Mutawintji National Park
The Western Catchment is also home to an abundance of Aboriginal history. About 150 km north of Menindee, in the heart of the Western Catchment, lies Mutawintji National Park. It is in the Bynguano Ranges, between White Cliffs and Broken Hill. When Sarah Murgatroyd researched her book “The Dig Tree” she visited the national park, describing the area as “one of the richest geological, biological, botanical and anthropological areas in NSW” (Murgatroyd, p 136) – a fact the expedition’s Advance Party failed to recognise. They simply filled their waterbags and left, describing it as “dark and gloomy”.

Mutawintji had been a place of ceremony and celebration for Aboriginal people for thousands of years before Burke and Wills arrived. With its permanent supply of water and game, it also provided a sort of emergency larder, a place of refuge that was not permanently occupied by any particular tribe. Its resources were never squandered and when better times returned tribes such as the Milpulo, Maljangapa and the Wanniwalku returned to the plains beneath. (Murgatroyd, p136)

As a member of the expedition’s Supply Party, Ludwig Becker was enchanted by the scenery at Mutawintji, with rock pools that attracted emus, kangaroos and wallabies and the only permanent water supply for many kilometres. His drawings are a lasting legacy of the Burke and Wills expedition and are an important record of a journey that otherwise had such disastrous results.
Learning from the knowledge of the past
Throughout the journey, Burke ignored the fact that Aboriginal settlements followed the rhythms of the natural landscape. For this reason, groups of Aboriginal people would move from camp to camp as the seasons dictated and to ensure the landscape had time to replenish itself. (Murgatroyd, 2002) At times, the explorers tried to find the Aboriginal camps and returned to where they had last seen them, only to find the Aboriginal people had moved on.

These were the Aboriginal people’s natural survival skills and techniques which the Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA) is currently working to help record. Today, Aboriginal people make up about 20% of the population of the Western Catchment. This is significantly higher than in other areas of NSW. The Western CMA works with the Aboriginal community through the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group (ARAG).

The ARAG was formed in 2006 to advise the CMA Board on how to ensure that decisions affecting the long-term sustainability of the environment are compatible with Aboriginal culture and values. It also has a role in helping to identify areas of cultural significance as part of the High Conservation Values program.

How Burke and Wills could have managed
Contrary to Burke and Wills’ opinion, Ben Flick said the Aboriginal people didn’t walk around the Catchment aimlessly. “Natural resource management was our game,” he said. “If some of the earliest explorers had known how our people could have helped them, they would have survived with local knowledge.”

Aboriginal people walked very lightly across the country and the way they used the natural resources, such as water, plants and animals ensured the long-term sustainability of the environment. Aboriginal people belong to the land and believe that everything comes from the land and goes back to the land. They used fire to control native vegetation and to help when they were hunting food, while also sharing resources with each other and never over burdening any particular area.

In a bid to capture the Aboriginal people's sustainable land management practices and cultural values, the Western CMA and Western Catchment ARAG are developing a knowledge system. The end product will be a web-enabled database from the Western CMA website that will link users to relevant organisations and documents, as well as audio and video files.

One element of this knowledge system is a series of short films featuring Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders from the Ngemba, Kamilaroi and Euahlayi language groups. In the Through our Eyes film series, they speak about the land management practices and cultural knowledge that enabled people to care for their country for thousands of years before European settlement.

Chair of the ARAG, Ben Flick said Aboriginal people have traditionally handed down their knowledge through spoken and visual means, which makes the video recording process relatively comfortable because it’s similar to sitting and talking to someone.

Western CMA Aboriginal Communities Catchment Officer, Blackie Gordon, with Ben Flick, Chair of the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group, during the filming of the Through our Eyes project

Brenda McBride shows vines that can be used for rope. Photo: Craig Bender
“From what the Elders have told me, if they knew the season would be tough, they worked with the resources that were available,” Ben said. “If there was a shortage of water, for example, people would travel to other areas where they had connections and they would share resources.”

When European people moved into the Western Catchment from the 1860s, they disregarded and disrupted the practices of Aboriginal people. Government policy later forcibly removed Aboriginal people from their traditional lands, which affected their ability to practice and maintain their way of life.

The Western Catchment is home to a very diverse collection of Aboriginal language groups – something that forms an integral part of their identity. The Through our Eyes film series is part of a larger project that aims to document land management practices and social, spiritual and cultural knowledge of the thirteen identified language groups found in the Catchment. The ARAG has also produced a map showing each of the current language groups in the Western Catchment. According to Ben Flick, if Burke and Wills had recognised and valued the different groups they came into contact with, they may have survived to tell their story.

“Burke and Wills probably thought there was just one big tribe of Aboriginal people,” he said. “But every different tribe has their own different markings and language and things are still shared. With that knowledge of who to see and where to find food, they would have been our greatest explorers and would have had a better understanding of the Aboriginal people.”

The language map is also being used as an educational tool, to pass knowledge on to younger generations and highlight the diversity of Aboriginal groups within the Western Catchment.

Current Aboriginal Language Groups as identified by the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group.

The Western Catchment ARAG acknowledges that there are multiple spellings of these names and respects other views about the language groups within the area.
High conservation value program
The Western Catchment is home to an abundance of significant Aboriginal sites and artefacts. The High Conservation Value (HCV) Program enables land managers to identify and better manage areas of significance.

Fred Hooper, Chairman of the Weilmoringle Land Holding Company, and his wife Kylie manage Weilmoringle and Orana Stations, 100 km north of Brewarrina. Through the HCV program, they are protecting extensive Murrawari sites of significance and artefacts found along Burbar Creek from feral animals and erosion by erecting more than 30 km of fencing to conserve 1,238 ha of land.

At Compton Downs, 70km south of Brewarrina, the Yatama Nugurra Land Enterprise has received HCV funding to install 12.5 km of fencing to protect the environmentally and culturally significant Little Thigibillas from wild goats and other feral animals. One of the objectives of the Enterprise is to provide opportunities for young Aboriginal people, to learn about the land and consider employment opportunities. Not only will this project allow the Little Thigabillas to be conserved and protected, it will also provide employment for Aboriginal teenagers.

These are just two of 20 properties where land managers are taking part in the Western CMA’s HCV program, which is protecting a total of 17,782 ha of environmentally or culturally significant areas.

Areas of HCV are rare or irreplaceable or of particular conservation value and therefore need to be carefully managed. Between 2009 and 2011, the Western CMA has committed $1.5 million to fund 20 HCV projects by helping people to better manage these special places and to hand their properties on to future generations in better condition than when they started.

References
Phoenix, David, 2005, Burke & Wills, Melbourne to the Gulf, Burke & Wills Web publication, www.burkeandwills.net.au