August 2010 marks the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Victorian Exploring Expedition, later known as the Burke and Wills Expedition. The expedition was the first to cross the continent, but that record came at great expense. Three of the expedition’s 19 original members travelled 5,000 km from Melbourne to the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria and then back to their camp at Cooper Creek. With a combination of poor leadership, bad luck and an unwillingness to learn from the original inhabitants they encountered along the way, seven men died in the attempt. This included the leader, Robert O’Hara Burke and the third in command, William John Wills. Only one man, John King, travelled the entire distance and survived to return to Melbourne, thanks to the Yandruwandha people who came to his aid and kept him alive.

They travelled through the Western Catchment without appreciating how variable, unpredictable or challenging the area can be. Today the people of far-western NSW are actively working to conserve and better manage the catchment’s natural resources. The Burke and Wills Expedition set out from Melbourne with the aim of crossing the continent of Australia from south to the north coast. Despite several attempts no European had done this before, and to the Victorian colonists the centre of the continent was unknown, unmapped and unexplored.
The start of the journey
The uncertainty that surrounds the expedition still continues to fascinate people today. But even the State Library of Victoria (online) warns that the historical records make it almost impossible to trace the explorers' exact route:

*It is best to start with two blunt facts about these records. They are incomplete and to some extent they are unreliable.*

The start of Burke and Wills' expedition from Melbourne's Royal Park on 20 August 1860 set the tone for what lay ahead. It was a scene of chaos as they struggled to make final preparations for a journey into the unknown that would take them into the heart of the desert in the heat of an Australian summer.

Ludwig Becker's August 1869 watercolour of the caravan on the march: camels to the left and horses to the right, with Burke in the middle on his horse Billy.

*(Reproduced with the permission of the State Library of Victoria.)*

With supplies to last two years, they were prepared for almost any eventuality, with everything from airbags to strap onto the heads of the camels so they could swim through deep water, to a wagon that could be converted into a raft, a cedar-topped oak camp table and pocket charcoal for every man to filter drinking water. The expedition had too many inappropriate supplies, including dandruff brushes and enema kits, yet they only packed two sets of field glasses and 12 water bottles. They were also unprepared for the sheer scale of the countryside, like other explorers of the time, as Murgatroyd (2002, p123) noted:

*The history of Australian exploration is littered with the corpses of men who underestimated the power, size and the unpredictability of the outback.*

The 19 men of the expedition included five Englishmen, six Irishmen, four Indian sepoys, three Germans and an American. They took 23 horses, six wagons and 26 camels. However, they also didn't have enough camels, horses and wagons to carry their 20 tonnes of equipment. The original plan was to transport a large amount of their supplies along the Darling River to Menindee, via Adelaide, but Burke overturned this just 48 hours before their departure and opted to take everything by road.

Royal Park was a scene of pandemonium. There was a carnival atmosphere, but onlookers were simply getting in the way of the expedition party as they finished packing. When they finally waved goodbye to the 15,000 onlookers, some three and a half hours late, their 500 metre procession was made up of 26 camels (six of which had been bought from a local circus), 23 horses, 19 men and six wagons. However, they didn't even make it out of the park before the first wagons became bogged.

The expedition leaders
The media described the expeditioners as pioneers of civilisation and progress. However, the flamboyant Irish former policeman, Superintendent Robert O'Hara Burke was also described as "impulsive, headstrong, with a history of mounting debts and a legendary reputation for getting lost" (Murgatroyd, p 66). He had no background in science or surveying, or any exploration experience, and was intent on being the first to cross the continent. In a somewhat reckless move that showed his impatience and agitation on the day of departure, Burke dismissed three members of the expedition before they finished packing and hired two extra wagons.

On the other hand, Wills was a passionate young scientist who felt the expedition was his personal mission to discover, record and explain the world around him". (Murgatroyd, p 5). He has been described as an intelligent and dependable member of the team and a man with a strong sense of duty.

The trip
The expedition travelled just 11 km on its first day. The first night was as chaotic as the scene of their departure. With so much equipment put together so hastily, nobody had any idea what was packed where, who was responsible for what or how they should set up camp. With rain and mud a significant obstacle from the outset, they covered only 100 km in the first week, despite travelling for up to 12 hours a day.

Three men were left behind at Balranald, when Burke decided to alter from the planned route and head through the tough mallee scrub to Menindee across deep sand which the wagons and horses sank into. They reached Menindee on 14 October largely without mishap but the 750 km journey that usually took 10 days by horseback had taken 56 days. By this time, Burke and his deputy, Landells had disagreed. Landells was dismissed when he reached Menindee and Wills promoted to second in command. At this stage, two of the
expedition’s five officers had resigned, thirteen members of the expedition had been dismissed and eight new men had been hired.

**Travelling through the Western Catchment**

At this point, Burke split the group and formed an advance party comprised of the strongest horses, seven of the fittest men and a small amount of equipment, with plans to push on quickly to Cooper Creek and wait for the others, the supply party, to catch up. The supply party waited on the banks of the Darling River from 19 October 1860 until 26 January 1861 while Burke and his party travelled north.

After spending almost two months travelling from Melbourne to Menindee (at that time the edge of European civilisation), Burke and Wills travelled very quickly through the Western Catchment. Good rainfall preceded them and waterholes were full. Burke and Wills spent only three weeks in what became the Western Catchment, not knowing that they would not survive to make the return journey.

William Wright led them along a route that was to the east of Sturt’s track 15 years before. They planned to travel 32 km (20 miles) a day in order to make the 640 km journey to Cooper Creek in under a month. With spring wildflowers in bloom, they worked their way from creek to creek, cutting a prominent B in a tree at each campsite and marking the number of the camp in Roman numerals.

"If our knowledge of the progress of the party depended upon Burke we would be little wiser; he was no diarist." (Moorehead, 1968, p 72). The historical records of the Burke and Wills Expedition are incomplete and, to some extent unreliable. According to the evidence available, this is the approximate path they followed through the Western Catchment.
The advance party travelled north from Menindee and camped at what became known as Broughton Vale Station, then passed through Coogee Lake Station. They then moved through Langawirra before stopping at what later became Mutawintji National Park.

Burke and his party are believed to have travelled through Bengora and are reported to have used a lookout at Nuntherungie Creek. They travelled close to Kayrunnera and reached Torowoto Swamp, which is now known as Yancannia Swamp, on 29 October. Here, he appointed Wright third in command and ordered him to return to Menindee to bring up the remainder of the men and supplies.

A marker peg remains at Narriearra in the north of the Western Catchment, showing a stop just west of the Bulloo River Overflow and north-east of Tibooburra. The party then ventured over the Queensland Border towards Innamincka and Cooper Creek.

When they reached Cooper Creek, Burke again split the group, choosing to make a dash for the coast with only three companions: Wills, Gray and King. It is believed that he made that decision because while in Menindee, Burke had heard that the experienced explorer John McDouall Stuart had taken up the South Australian Government’s challenge to reach the north coast first and Burke wanted to ensure it was his name in the record books.

Because of exceptional rains they encountered no water shortage and in February 1861 they sighted the Gulf of Carpentaria beyond impenetrable mangrove swamps.

Meanwhile, at the Cooper Creek depot, a plague of rats forced the remaining men to move camp and they formed a second stockade, known as Camp 65 further downstream at Bullah Bullah Waterhole. They waited there for 18 weeks. With supplies running low and starting to feel the effects of scurvy, they started to believe that Burke would never return from the Gulf.

However, marching 12 hours a day, Burke and his three companions covered the return journey of 2400 km to Cooper Creek in a little over four months, but Gray died on the way.

On Sunday, 21 April 1861 the men left behind at Cooper Creek, led by Wright, departed for Menindee just nine hours before Burke, Wills and King returned.

Burke, Wills and King dug up the provisions the supply party had buried for them under what is known as The Dig Tree with a letter explaining that they had given up waiting and had left only that morning, however, the three men and the two remaining camels were exhausted and had no hope of catching up to the supply party.

Instead of following them back to Menindee, Burke decided to follow the Cooper downstream to a cattle station near Mount Hopeless. They buried a note.
under the tree to explain where they were headed, but didn’t change the markings on The Dig Tree.

When two men from the supply party returned to Cooper Creek to check if they had reappeared, they found no sign of them, although Burke, Wills and King were only 56 km away. So the would-be rescuers headed back to Menindee and in the coming months both Burke and Wills died, while King survived with the help of the Yandruwandha people and was eventually taken back to Melbourne by a later rescue mission.

Recording the reality

In some of his writings back to Victoria, it was clear that Burke was keen to please. He described the agricultural potential of Torowoto Swamp with optimism. He wrote of “fine sheep grazing country” and “grass nearly fit to mow” (Murgatroyd, p 137), unaware of the enormous seasonal variations that exist in inland Australia, where a ‘swamp’ may be dry for part of the year.

Burke’s enthusiasm was over-stated for the benefit of his patrons and prompted farmers to set off with flocks of sheep in search of the finest sheep grazing country, only to be faced a few decades later with drought and dust - the conditions to which today’s land managers have adapted.

Herman Beckler, a doctor with the expedition, was however struck by the vastness and adversity that inland Australia represented. While camped near Menindee, just before the expedition entered the Western Catchment, Beckler recognised that the lush farming land early pioneers had come in search of was not going to be found past that point.

He saw that the township of Menindee had been brought to life by the Darling River and the access to Adelaide that was provided by the fortnightly riverboat service. Sand drifts and other impacts helped him recognise the landscape as unforgiving. He did not see how imported stock could be expected to survive, as Murgatroyd (p 120) recorded:

*If one were to show this country to an expert just arrived from Europe and tell him that this was good pasture land…he would laugh in your face…for the most part it was a miserable country of a strangely sombre nature…grasses were hardly to be seen, small gaunt trees made the country seem even poorer and half of these were dead.*

What did they achieve?

The journey was criticised for its absence of a systematic plan of operations and for Burke’s disregard for his instructions. The 1861 Royal Commission into the expedition findings stated:

*It does not appear that Mr Burke kept any regular journal, or that he gave written instructions to his officers. Had he performed any of these essential portions of the duties of a leader, many of the calamities of the expedition might have been averted, and little or no room would have been left for doubt in judging the conduct of those subordinates who pleaded unsatisfactory and contradictory verbal orders and statements.*

While this tragic expedition was costly (both financially and in the loss of life) and accomplished little, in some ways it was not a waste of time. It had completed the picture of inland Australia, and proved that there was no inland sea. More importantly, each of the rescue parties sent from different parts of the continent added in some way to the understanding of the land it crossed.

Following in the footsteps of Burke and Wills, pastoralists headed to the region with flocks of sheep, in search of green pastures. While the Aboriginal people had lived in harmony with the seasons for tens of thousands of years, the European settlers found it an unpredictable and unforgiving landscape.

*The Maiden’s Menindee Hotel as it looks today. Tom Pain built this hotel in about 1854 and the supply party spent much of their time there while camped nearby in late 1860.*
150 years later
In the ensuing 150 years, much has changed. Across the nation, land managers are now dealing with threats to our natural resources that range from loss and degradation of habitat to the spread of invasive species, inappropriate fire regimes, changes to water flows and the impacts of grazing stock and climate change.

Today’s land managers recognise that the Western Catchment offers a challenging environment that requires them to be proactive, flexible and forward-thinking in their approach to life on the land.

Where Burke and Wills struggled to make their journey with camels, wagons and horses, today’s land managers have new and frequently changing technology and equipment, as well as accessible roads and modern transport. They also have increasing access to communication and can benefit from weather forecasts based on historical records, which allows them to be more responsive to environmental changes.

The Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA) works closely with land managers to better manage the catchment’s natural resources. It is also working with Aboriginal communities to document the skills, experience and cultural knowledge of the Aboriginal people that Burke and Wills did not take the time to appreciate, and which could have resulted in their triumphant return to Melbourne, rather than their defeat at the hands of the Australian Outback.

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