The Burke and Wills Expedition, Gold and Ballarat

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The Sovereign Hill Museums Association

April 2011
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Burke and Wills

“Thirs was no gay adventure
In some softly pleasant place:
They left home’s quiet sanctitude
To meet a hostile race;
To carve a passage through the land,
That down its channels wide,
With a joyous start might flow a part
Of the restless human tide.”

Illustrated London News, December 1862

By 1860, nearly two-thirds of Australia remained unexplored. The Australian interior remained one of the last great unconquered wildernesses of the world, and there were those who believed that untold riches, an inland sea, and a pastoral paradise lay waiting to be discovered. But there were also many who feared the unknown lands, and were awed by its immensity, hearing forbidding tales of lone explorers and eager pastoralists who ventured forth, only to return with tales of a grim, unforgiving country, unfit for habitation. Some never returned at all.

John Sherer, 19th century settler and diarist, described the Australian bush as unrewarding and boring: “There can be no walk, no journey of any kind, more monotonous than one through the bush … there is no association of the past connected with it … Imagination is at a standstill … There are no sacred graves … no birthplaces of great men. Nothing of this kind: all is deadly dull, uninspiring hard work.”

Advance Victoria!

The Discovery of Gold

But in 1851, two things happened which overrode the intimidation felt at the thought of the great trackless waste – “the sandy wilderness” – of the Australian interior. Victoria achieved separation from New South Wales, and, almost immediately afterwards, gold

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1 A great deal of the information on this subject can be obtained by using the following websites: http://burkeandwills.slv.vic.gov.au/content/terra-incognita; and Burke & Wills Web http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/General/help.htm.
2 The Lost Explorers, by F.M. Hughan, Melbourne Herald, 1st December 1861.
4 Ibid. p. 9.
was discovered in Victoria. And as Ferdinand von Mueller so aptly put it, “with the discovery of gold a new epoch commenced in our history.”

Without gold, the colony of Victoria might have lingered for a long time as the undeveloped, poorer second cousin to the greater importance and prosperity of the founding colony of New South Wales. In fact, gold transformed Victoria overnight: as Geoffrey Serle states, “the modern civilisation … brought by the gold seekers in a very short time placed Victoria in the van of European progress.” Victorian gold impacted across Europe and Britain; it had an immediate impact on trade and wages because shortages in practically every commodity had to be met – often at inflated prices! – and Australia’s imports skyrocketed from less than £3 million in 1851 to £14.5 million in 1853 – of which Victoria took the great bulk. In ten years, gold had transformed Victoria from a minor pastoral settlement to the most celebrated British colony. In 1851, her population was 77,000; by 1861, it was 540,000 or nearly half the total population of Australia. Victoria supplied one-third of the world’s gold production and about one-sixth of Britain’s vast imports of wool; her scale of business activities was twice as great as that of New South Wales. The fame of the colony, in fact, had become world-wide.

Melbourne

Melbourne, the colony’s main city, was transformed, becoming recognised as ‘the overtopping wonder of the world’. Over half a million people came to the Victorian goldfields, constituting an ‘explosive force which transmuted an insignificant seaport into one of the world’s major cities.’ In Melbourne, sudden wealth meant a dramatic increase in buildings – by the end of 1852, houses had gone from 1000 to 5000; by early 1854, that total had reached 9000. A massive public works program was underway, and commentator William Kelly in 1858 was in awe of Melbourne’s progress – he gazed on ‘the magnificent street lines’ being ‘fast filled up with stately buildings of the most chaste and beautiful character’, the ‘banks … bent on outstripping each other in their grand or florid imitations’, the University, ‘beautifully conspicuous on its magnificent site, elevated above the common level like a fount destined to irrigate the metropolis with wisdom, learning and science’, the Public Library ‘finely situated’, the Parliament Houses, the railways, and the suburbs ‘all more or less beautifully situated’, having grown up into ‘large suburban settlements, covered with splendid residences or charming villas … forming the most exquisite retreats for the citizens’. All of this, he reflected, achieved in twenty years, before which the city was ‘a savage wilderness sparsely peopled with squalid savages’.

5 “An historical review of the explorations of Australia”, Dr. Ferdinand von Mueller, presented to the Philosophical Institute of Victoria at an extra meeting of the Institute, held on Wednesday 25th November 1857, p. 1
In the 1850s, one of the greatest periods of gold production which the world had ever seen, Australia produced 38% of the world’s gold, and of that, Victoria produced 33%. By the end of the decade, 25 million ounces of gold had been won from the Victorian diggings – valued at a staggering £100 million (present day value c. $10 billion). This great wealth created an irrepressible sense of pride and destiny in the colony which would not be gainsaid: the Age wrote in 1858 that

“*We have the ballot; we have manhood suffrage; we have abolished the property qualification for the assembly … in liberality of public opinion and feeling we have made wonderful advances. We may safely say that the social tyranny of sectarianism is non-existent in the free breezes that blow over Victoria.*”

Victorians believed that they had been specially blessed by Providence; their self-belief was irresistible – anything seemed possible. Journalist James Smith observed that “there was something wonderfully infectious in the atmosphere of hope and cheerfulness, of buoyancy and joyful expectation, which enveloped us.” The citizens of Melbourne, in fact, deliberately set about building a city which was a monument to ‘human endeavour, material well-being, and spiritual satisfaction.’ Geoffrey Serle writes of the unusually high intellectual quality of the migrants, and identifies a sophistication which came with the wealth of gold, embodied in part in a commitment to provide public contexts for learning.

Kathleen Fennessy believes that this interest in ‘learning throughout life’ was made manifest in the involvement of Victorians in voluntary societies and associations certainly, they believed that they were demonstrating their civic commitment to learning by funding and using public museums and gardens. In the extraordinary years of ‘cultural’ development, between 1851 and 1861, even as the gold decade unfolded, Victoria saw the creation of the Victorian Institute for the Advancement of Science, the Philosophical Institute (these later amalgamated to form the Royal Society), the first magnetic observatory at Williamstown, followed by a second on Flagstaff Hill, the establishment of a natural history museum (to become Melbourne’s museum), the establishment of the University of Melbourne, and the founding and construction of the State Library of Victoria. The Royal Botanic Gardens were set up by La Trobe in 1846, and Ferdinand von Mueller was appointed Director in 1857; Mueller was also appointed Government Botanist in 1853, a position which he held until 1896. In 1857, a Zoological Society was formed, and in 1862, the Melbourne Zoo was also set up on land donated by the City of Melbourne. Before that, animals had been housed at the botanical gardens. As well, the Legislative Council set up a Mining Commission to develop the mineral wealth of Victoria, and appointed Alfred Selwyn as the Government Geologist. Selwyn and his team produced the first comprehensive Geological Survey of Victoria.

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11 Ibid., p. 22.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
The National Gallery of Victoria also appeared at this time: it was founded in 1861, and built initially on the wealth of gold, and it is the oldest and the largest public art gallery in Australia.

Gold created a society of hope: people came to Victoria from all over the world to seek wealth and a new life, and in the decades following the 1851 discovery of the precious metal, they set about building a city (Melbourne) and a state (Victoria) which reflected their belief in the potential for the working man to access wide ranging learning and cultural opportunities, and which celebrated the pride that they had in their successful accumulation of wealth. Kathleen Fennessy identifies that the learning institutions established in the decade after gold was discovered ‘represented colonists’ faith in the power of humans to subdue and control the wild, and in civil society to bring order out of the chaos and create social harmony’\textsuperscript{16}. The knowledge inherent in the establishment of a library, museum, gallery, scientific institutions, and a university, empowered colonists, and increased their opportunities to improve their material position, as well as increasing their understanding of the new world into which they had entered. Colonial leaders like Redmond Barry, who did more than almost any other to develop Victoria’s cultural landscape, were on a mission to both provide knowledge and learning opportunities to the ‘masses’, and to allow them to do so in buildings and venues which inspired and mirrored the glorious present and glowing future of the colony. The original tender advertisement for the Public Library, found amongst Barry’s own papers, confirms these lofty sentiments:

“… designs for the erection of a Public Library are hereby called for. It is proposed that the building, which is to be erected in a commanding situation, should be of an order, class and magnitude suitable to the prospects of the country.”\textsuperscript{17} Barry himself wrote of “the enterprising genius, the persevering exertions and generous contributions of those of lowly birth and unobtrusive calling, [and] the enquiring thirst for knowledge in the humble artificer…\textsuperscript{18} of the people of Victoria, and laboured mightily to shape Victorian institutions to meet these needs – “ While the power of possessing the works of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting is allowed only to the wealthy and the great, the enjoyment of the charms of these is not denied to, and cannot be withheld from, the poor and the humble; they address themselves not to the ostentatious and the vain, but to the prudent and the wise, are accessible alike to all classes, all grades …”\textsuperscript{19}

This sense of destiny, this overweening self-confidence, and this hunger for knowledge and for breaking the physical boundaries which still limited the fledgling Victorian colony gave birth to the grand idea of a transcontinental exploration. The project was initially conceived in 1857, by the Philosophical Institute of Victoria (later the Royal Society), and was to be funded by the Government, and by public subscription. It should be

\textsuperscript{16} Fennessy, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. p. 87.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. p. 87.
noted, however, that not everyone shared the Institute’s conviction. In December 1857, the explorer, A.C. Gregory sent a letter to the Institute, responding to the exploration idea. His comments were not encouraging. Referring to the 1300 kilometres of unexplored country between the Cooper and the north coast of Australia, Gregory’s assessment of its potential confirmed increasing doubts about the poor prospects of the northern lands:

“Along the whole line examined (extending 3,700 miles) the universal character of the country along the boundary is level sandy desert or worthless scrub, without any sign of change in advancing into the interior beyond that of increasing sterility, caused by the greater aridity of the climate, while not one single stream emanates from this inhospitable region, to indicate ranges of hills, better soil or climate, beyond the limits of actual examination.”

But the impetus to open up the interior and to confirm Victoria’s place at the top of the national tree, became irresistible, and as the population and affluence of the colony increased in the first years of the gold rush, so too did inter-colonial rivalry. The race to document the interior of the country which was unknown to Europeans – *terra incognita* - became overwhelmingly an opportunity to conspicuously display Victoria’s new found wealth and importance: the beguiling prospect of successfully traversing the continent had entranced the worthy gentlemen of the Philosophical Institute, to the point where their judgement was clouded, and the successful outcome of the expedition was in doubt.

**What was the Royal Society?**

The Royal Society of Victoria was a private association formed in the early days of the gold rush in an attempt to emulate similar institutions in Britain. As indicated, it was originally known as The Philosophical Society of Victoria, and was modelled on the Royal Society in London. It received royal assent for its name change to the Royal Society in late 1859. The Society encouraged scientific research and the dissemination of new information. Some of its members were trained scientists, some self-educated enthusiasts, and many were simply educated professional men interested in the advancement of knowledge. In today’s technologically and scientifically advanced society, it is hard to imagine a world where it was possible for amateurs to make important and useful discoveries in many branches of science, but in the middle of the 19th century, and in the midst of a new country like Australia, this was certainly still achievable. Between November 1859 and January 1860, a committee of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria inquired into the practicability of fitting out an expedition for traversing the unknown exterior of the Australian continent. As Geoffrey Serle explains it, “men of scientific interests were fascinated and irritated by the unsolved question of the nature of the northern interior”\(^\text{21}\), and the men of the Royal

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Society of Victoria saw it as their responsibility to “remove the mantle of mystery which lay over the centre of the continent.”\textsuperscript{22} – It was, in fact, perceived as the most pressing duty of their generation. On 23\textsuperscript{rd} January 1860, Dr. Mueller, the Melbourne president, enthusiastically placed the Royal Society at the forefront of “gigantic progress” ahead, in exploration, commerce, communications, agriculture, industry, and the arts.” Humanity, he believed, would be “elevated more and more by science”, and illuminated by “rays of the dawning civilisation”. He suggested, in fact, that future generations would “gently judge the labours of this epoch”\textsuperscript{23}, little realising as he did so, that both future and present generations would be less than generous in their toleration and condemnation of what became the Victorian Exploring Expedition debacle.

**Reasons for the Victorian Exploration Expedition**

*Victoria: “the wealthiest and most civilised of the communities which have hence sprung into existence” …\textsuperscript{24}*  

From crowded cities severed far  
Where glitters bright the southern star  
There lies a land of wide domains,  
Of golden rocks, and grassy plains;  
Whose soil to till, and wealth unlock,  
From distant climes, all peoples flock,  
Whilst, canopied ‘neath cloudless skies,  
They help a mighty nation’s rise.

Victoria! those domains are thine;  
As bright a sun may elsewhere shine,  
And smile upon a fairer show  
Of glories that with age must grow;  
But never yet was land more rife  
With seeds that sprang to quicker life,  
And never land of olden time  
Gave promise of a richer prime. \textsuperscript{25}

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\textsuperscript{23} Cannon, pp. 375-76.  
\textsuperscript{24} From Transactions of the Royal Society of Victoria from January to December, 1860, Volume.  
“Our desire to unveil the remaining unknown portions of Australia is not limited at this moment by demands on our patriotism or our progress alone; its future exploration is likewise claimed by our humanity, and by our honor as a nation.”

Thus wrote Ferdinand von Mueller in a presentation to the Philosophical Institute of Victoria in 1857.

There were many reasons why the newly proclaimed, rich colony of Victoria was keen to support and fund the Victorian Exploring Expedition.

‘Pride’ was one of the strongest factors. Victoria was justly proud of the wealth and the international reputation which gold was generating, and believed that such wealth gave her the right to lead the race to the north. Mounting and funding the expedition, therefore, was a chance to show what Victorians could do with their money, and an opportunity to demonstrate that they could afford to spend it on things that would not benefit them directly. “A very general feeling was, however, everywhere expressed as to the importance of exploration, and the duty of Victoria as the wealthiest of the Australian colonies, to take her share in the work.”

Through the Victorian Exploration Expedition, Victoria was set to confirm herself as the pre-eminent Australian colony, with noble, national aspirations…

“Every Australian must now acknowledge that Victoria has at length vindicated her character among the Australian colonies, and every citizen of Victoria will feel a national pride in the reflection that, in looking beyond the mere selfish interests of our colony, our legislators have nobly responded to the claims of humanity and of Australian settlement.”

“The bright star of Australian progress” was believed to be in the ascendancy, and it is clear from the Exploration Committee Reports that the mystery, romance and allure of unexplored places were beckoning. These reports were explicit about the lofty ideals which motivated the Expedition. It possessed, they believed, “an object which was national in character, and must secure the approbation of every Australian who is anxious to promote the material prosperity of his country, to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge, to clear up the mystery which envelopes the fate of poor Leichhardt, and to facilitate our intercourse with the other hemisphere.” It was hoped that Victoria might, at last, and with the boost of wealth from gold, be able to “worthily emulate the laudable example which has been set us by the adjoining colonies.”

Ferdinand von Mueller summed up the high flown aspirations which inspired many Victorians at that time:

“Much has been done, but much remains to be achieved! And if the greatest genius which ever mankind possessed, after his most brilliant achievements, left us, with the

29 Special Report, January 1860.
30 Special Report, January 1860.
31 3rd Report September 1858.
modesty which always characterises a son of science, an immortal and self-denying word, we may regard the labours of our own great explorers only as leading stars for the future discoveries and we may apply to them Newton’s philosophic words:

“I have played like a child with the pebbles on the shore while the great ocean of truth lies unexplored before me.”32

As well, however, there were certainly quite clearly defined and unashamed economic motives for driving the expedition idea. Material wealth and benefits were expected to flow from opening up the continent. The leading men of Victoria wished to “open up new areas of commerce; to indicate how we may obtain access to vast areas of pastoral land from which we are at present cut off …”33, and to “engage the sympathies and command the support of the merchant, the squatter and the miner, no less than those of the man of science”34.

The practical outcome of following these dreams became the drive to establish contact with the rest of the world through the establishment of the telegraph - “for such an enterprise promises to abridge the distance which separates us from the Old World; to bring us at an early date in telegraphic communication with India and Europe…”35. For a country understanding itself to be in dramatic physical isolation from the rest of the world, the notion of reducing that isolation must have been tantalising – even mandatory. The best predicted outcomes of a successful expedition promised just such benefits – not just the establishment of communication networks, but the development of rich trading opportunities. On 21st August, 1860, the day on which the expedition departed, The Age newspaper claimed firstly that they believed the opening up of the north coast to be “the incumbent duty of Victoria, as the foremost Australian community”, and optimistically defined the expected benefits of a successful expedition:

“Where the camel pioneers the way, telegraph and tramway and railway will in due course inevitably follow. There will be a rush of travellers, and of at least the lighter and not least valuable kinds of merchandise, through the sandy wildernesses of our present terra incognita. Who that looks at the progress of new countries in these modern days … can doubt the advent of such a spectacle? Can we not discern the probability of great cities beside the now lonely waters of Carpentaria …? And had not Melbourne, the foremost Australian emporium, a primary interest in their realisation? – in merchanting, and manufacturing not only for Asiatic consumers, but for the colonies of our own people which will naturally arise in the fertile tracts of the interior and of the north of this continent?”36

32 Ferdinand von Mueller, in his presentation to the Philosophical Institute of Victorian 25th November 1857, p. 11.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 The Age, 21 August 1860, p. 5.
Some popular commentators, however, saw the Victorian exploration enterprise more as *simple one-upmanship* – an intercolonial race to beat the rest of the settled colonies to the imagined riches of the unexplored north. It was thought that John McDouall Stuart, who had set out from South Australia with the same goal of crossing the continent, would soon reach the Gulf of Carpentaria, and Victorian anxiety about the potential of South Australia to move ahead in the colonial land stakes was increasing. As Manning Clark wrote, “those cheeky aspirants to be cock of the walk, the South Australians, and that pompous wild ass of a man, McDouall Stuart, were crowing away again about the ‘Top End’ of Australia as their territory.”

Some Victorians had good grounds for self doubt: the *Age* worried about the choice of Burke as the leader. By April 1860, with Stuart already three months on the road north, the Royal Society had still not selected a leader, mapped out a route, or taken delivery of the famous camels. The *South Australian Register* was gleeful:

> “Only let the Victorian explorers look out for their laurels. It is quite possible and by no means improbable that at this moment the problem of the interior is solved and that John McDouall Stuart will be back in time to show the camels a beaten track through the heart of the mainland.”

South Australia saw itself as well-placed to be the hub of the overland telegraph connections between the eastern states, and in their turn, feared Victoria’s efforts to mount an expedition to the north. Sarah Murgatroyd quotes the “openly scathing” *South Australian Register*, which attempted to reduce the impetus of the Victorian momentum…”Victoria has hitherto done nothing in the work of exploration, and with the customary ardour of a neophyte she is now projecting labours which no veteran would willingly undertake.” Victoria’s fear of the possible success of Stuart’s (and South Australia’s) efforts was almost certainly one of the motivating factors for the State’s funding, and eventual launch, of the Burke and Wills expedition.

So – intercolonial rivalry, self and national aggrandisement, lofty visions, the urgent need for new lands - the list of motives for crossing the continent were numerous and compelling, but they were also confused. This lack of clarity and purpose complicated things from the outset, and compromised the far sightedness of the vision with which the Victorian founding fathers initially embarked upon this great enterprise. Significantly, the last message to Burke from the Society’s secretary was: “The Honor of Victoria is in your hands.” With the weight of such responsibility on his shoulders, it seemed that

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37 Clark, Manning: *A History of Australia*, Volumes III and IV from 1824 to 1888, p. 146.
38 “it would have been the proper course to have searched out one who had distinguished himself - who had won his spurs on that arduous field [the desert of inland Australia], and whose dearly-won experience would make success in the present undertaking a matter not merely of hope but of certainty. The choice, however, has now been made...” *The Age*, 21st August 1860, p. 5.
39 Murgatroyd, p. 53.
41 Neophyte = “beginner”.
42 Ibid.
43 Serle, p.367.
Burke’s leadership was never going to be about simply finding a way across the continent. The ‘Honor of Victoria’, no less, was to be the grand prize.

The stage was set for the disaster which followed.

**The Great Victorian Exploration Race**

A race! A race! So great a one
The world ne’er saw before;
A race! a race! across this land
From south to northern shore.

A race between two colonies!
Each has a stalwart band
Sent out beyond the settled bounds,
Into the unknown land.

The one is captain’d by a man
Already known to fame,
Who with Australian annals has
Forever linked his name.

The other one’s a leader, who
Has all his bays to earn;
Let’s hope that he, a well-won wreath
May claim on his return!

The horseman hails from Adelaide,
The camel riders ours :-
Now let the steed maintain his speed,
Against the camel’s powers.

No small concealments each from each,
No shuffling knavish ways,
No petty jealousies and strifes,
No paltry peddling traits,

Will find a place in such a race,
But honor, virtue, worth,
And all that can enoble man
Will brilliantly shine forth

A cheer then for each member, and
A big one for the lot,
For it is known how all have shown
These virtues. -- Have they not? 44

The Expedition

"Their hearts with hope were buoyant,
And each face with gladness bright;
And many were the fervent prayers
That in safety they might go,
Through a hidden land to the distant strand
Where ocean billows flow." 45

"Mr. Burke ... was mounted on a gallant grey charger ... No expedition, he said, had ever started under such favourable circumstances. The Government and the Exploration Committee had all done everything in their power; and it was now the part of the members of the expedition to show what they could do." 46

The exploration committee, after anxious and careful deliberation, had chosen Robert O’Hara Burke as the expedition leader. Burke was the superintendent of police in the Castlemaine district. His most obvious qualification for the job seemed to be that he fitted the mould of ‘gentleman’ – “he was in the tradition of the gentlemen explorers of the Australian wilderness”47. From a ‘social’ point of view, he seemed most appropriate; from any other, his qualifications for leading this most important expedition were dubious. As Murgatroyd succinctly puts it, he was “a man who had never travelled beyond the settled districts of Australia, who had no experience of exploration and who was notorious for getting lost on his way home from the pub."48 However, doubts set aside, and with much official huffing and puffing, the expedition set off on 20th August 1860. Departing Royal Park in Melbourne, it arrived at Essendon at 7.30 in the evening. It had managed to move just eleven kilometres on the first day.

The story of the expedition, and the many coincidences, lost opportunities, and often farcical management bungles is not one to be told here. Suffice to say that, after five months, a remnant party of the expedition, comprising Burke, Wills, King and Gray set out from Cooper’s Creek for the Gulf of Carpentaria (16th December 1860). In February (probably around 11th), Burke and Wills left King and Gray at the swamp flats on the Flinders River, and attempted to reach the coast and gain a clear sight of the Gulf. They

44 Nicholas Chevalier, Melbourne Punch, 18 November 1860, 
http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Bibliography/Poems/chevalier.htm

45 The Lost Explorers, by F.M. Hughan, Melbourne Herald, 1 December, 1861.
46 The Argus, 21 August, 1860, p.5.
47 Clark, p. 147.
48 Murgatroyd, p. 55.
failed to do so. In fact, they had made it to within 20 kilometres of the coast, but had small understanding of that fact. The countryside had degenerated into a tangle of impassable mangrove swamps, and they were forced to turn back with no view of the sea at all. Burke recorded in his notebook on 28th March that:

“At the conclusion of the report, it would be 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.”

“... How they battled bravely onward,
For a nobler prize than thrones,
And how they lay, in the glaring day,
With the sun to bleach their bones.”

The expedition ended in tragedy. On 17th April, Gray died. The remaining three, Burke, Wills and King, returned to Cooper’s Creek, where they missed the relief party by hours. They headed off towards Mt Hopeless, and the settled areas of South Australia, attempting a new route. After a veritable comedy of errors, the three ended up back at the Cooper, exhausted and despairing. Wills died in late June, alone, whilst Burke and King were searching for the indigenous people whom, they hoped, might assist them to survive. Burke died a few days after Wills, leaving King to find his own way, having laid Burke out ‘like a gentleman’. King joined the aborigines, who supported him until Howitt’s relief party was able to reach him, on September 15th.

The Victorian Government held a Commission of Enquiry into the deaths of Burke and Wills. Howitt was sent back to Coopers Creek to recover their bodies and the explorers were given a state funeral in Melbourne on 23 January 1863. They were hailed as heroes, and the Royal Society scrambled to justify the costly mistakes and tragic outcomes of the expedition. A way had indeed been found across the continent, but the cost had been enormous and the losses tragic.

Gold was the glittering foundation on which the pride and affluence of the colony of Victoria was built. But its brilliance had so bedazzled the sober suited and top-hatted gentlemen of the Royal Society of Victoria that their vision of a pathway to a wealthy and prosperous Victoria turned to dust. Gold, it seemed, did not necessarily pave the way to riches and success – at least, not without great human cost.

The final paragraph of the Commission into the Expedition is revelatory:

We cannot too deeply deplore the lamentable result of an expedition, undertaken at so great a cost to the colony; but while we regret the absence of a systematic plan of operations on the part of the leader, we desire to express our admiration of his gallantry and daring as well as of the fidelity of his brave coadjutor, Mr. Wills and their more
fortunate and enduring associate Mr. King; and we would record our feelings of deep sympathy with the deplorable sufferings and untimely deaths of Mr. Burke and his fallen comrades.\textsuperscript{51}

Unwilling to condemn a dead hero, the report expressed mild regrets about Burke's shortfalls as a leader, but on the whole clung to the romance of his "gallantry and daring". The "lamentable outcome" of the expedition was, as the years passed, to become lost in the telling of the sad but glorious tale of those who marched off into the Australian desert with massive funding, immense public enthusiasm, and little or no understanding of what was to befall them.

**Burke and Wills Remembered**

‘… a fitting memorial’

"Now gather round your household hearths,
Your children by your knee;
'Tis well that they should understand
This tale of misery."\textsuperscript{52}

In towns and cities across the state, the memory of the dead explorers was lauded, and commemorated in a variety of monuments and statues. Statues were seen as a mark of respect, but also were a very 19\textsuperscript{th} century means of demonstrating to the world the wealth and sophistication of the society which created them.

In Melbourne, there was a concerted call for a great and lasting tribute to the explorers. It was decided to erect a monumental sculpture cast in bronze; the *Argus* wrote that, in the distant future, the city of Melbourne should "be able to show to all comers … a fitting memorial of the great fact that, from her very midst started the Expedition which was destined to herald the way of future generations from the south to the north coast of Australia. She should be able to show, at the same time, that in this, her youth, She was able to appreciate a work of this magnitude, and as far as such work can be paid for, reward the men who carried out the work – to the dead giving lasting and honoured memory …".\textsuperscript{53}

A change of government, bickering and debate about the most appropriate use of public money, discussion about the location, and the design of the monument itself, meant that the public unveiling of the statue did not actually occur until 21\textsuperscript{st} April 1865.

But the debate continued – the Exploration Committee had resolved to erect a monument in the Melbourne Cemetery to the memory of the explorers, but the enterprise was hampered by more disputation over funding and the wording of the

\textsuperscript{51} Report of the Commission of Enquiry, published 21\textsuperscript{st} February 1861, final paragraph.

\textsuperscript{52} The Lost Explorers, by F.M.Hughan, Melbourne Herald, 1 December 1861.

\textsuperscript{53} Bonyhady, Tim, *Burke and Wills From Melbourne to Myth*, David Ell Press, 1991, p. 246
inscription; by 1870, the monument still remained without any dedication, or a protective railing. Finally, in 1873, the inscription was finalised, and read

“In memory of Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills. The first to cross the continent of Australia – Burke and Wills, Gray, King (survivor) – comrades in a great achievement, companions in death, and associates in renown. Leader and second in command of the Victorian Exploring Expedition died at Cooper’s Creek, June, 1861.”

The credibility of the Royal Society was considerably diminished after the Burke and Wills exploration fiasco, and the final debate involving the cemetery monument did not help their standing in the community at all. The blundered choosing of Burke as leader of the expedition, the expedition cost blow out (a total of £57,000), and the lack of any real, measurable advance of human scientific knowledge, meant that the effect on the Society was serious. Michael Cannon documents that when Burke and Wills set out from Melbourne in 1860, the society had 300 members; by 1864, only 30 members voluntarily paid their subscriptions. In the years after the expedition’s disastrous end, the society spent a good deal of time and effort attempting to restore their community standing, and Chairman William Stawell’s final Expedition report (1863) represents a sad revision of von Mueller’s proud and optimistic predictions in 1860.

“The disasters which befell the Burke and Wills Expedition created a strong and painful feeling in the public mind. That feeling, sought to relieve itself by expression. Grief was ineffectual, and indignation demanded an object. None presented itself at the moment but the Exploration Committee, which was condemned without the opportunity of a trial, and denounced without the opportunity of defence.

That posterity will reverse a decision which was as precipitate as it was unjust, the Exploration Committee confidently expect. All the materials for arriving at a just, deliberate and impartial decision are to be found in the records of their proceedings and in the various reports to which the present is a sequel; and they relinquish labors; - which have been arduous and protracted in themselves and glorious in their results, with the calm consciousness that those labors have been conducted in a zealous and disinterested spirit, have been persevered in, in the face of obloquy misrepresentation and detraction, and will be found to have conducted most materially to the honor of Victoria and the advantage of the British race”.

Other memorials

54 Cannon, p. 377.
55 Progress Reports of the Exploration Committee, Seventh & Final Report, 1863; Melbourne: Royal Society of Victoria. Mason & Firth Printers
The expedition was commemorated across the colony, and by the end of the decade all but two of the provincial memorials had been erected. These were located at Bendigo, Castlemaine, Fryerstown, and Beechworth, whilst Talbot conducted a ‘money testimonial’ for the survivor, King.

“Hero-hearted Wills” - William John Wills, Ballarat’s ‘own lamented fellow-citizen’

At Ballarat, the movement to memorialise the two explorers was taken up with great enthusiasm – particularly because of the link with Wills, the surveyor, and Burke’s surveyor, astronomer and second in command. William Wills Snr. operated a medical practice in Ballarat in the 1850s, and son William spent around 12 months working with his father in the practice; Dr Wills records that the enterprising William also ‘opened a gold office adjoining my tent and did very well.’ According to his father, the young William was never idle, and only took a month to construct and complete a wooden addition to the family medical practice and residence (this was in Ballarat East, near the railway station). The building was ‘perfectly weatherproof, and stood good for some years, being only taken down when an alteration in the line of the street rendered its removal necessary.’ Dissatisfied with medical practice and town life, William then, with his father’s help, undertook a type of apprenticeship with Mr. Taylor, the Ballarat district surveyor; Wills Jr. worked under ‘Mr. Byerly, a very superior man’. He and Byerly appeared to get on well together: ‘in fact, I could not have had a better master had he been made to order, for he is a first-rate surveyor, and we are exactly suited to each other in our general ideas; and this, to tell the truth, is a rare chance for me.’ But as his father noted, young William was fated to seek his fortune and destiny elsewhere. Dr. Wills’ observation about his son, that “… he was ever pining for the bush. The ‘busy haunts of men’ had no attraction for him. He preferred the society of a few to that of many, but the study of nature was his passion. His love was fixed on animals, plants, and the starry firmament was, in hindsight, prophetic. Wills the explorer, himself, observed that surveying was ‘just the sort of life for me, nearly always in the bush marking out land for sale, or laying down unknown parts. It is quite a different thing from surveying in England.’ In early 1859, Wills began working as assistant at the

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56 The Lost Explorers, by F.M.Hughan, Melbourne Herald, 1st December 1861
57 Ballarat Star, Supplement, 7th February, 1863.
58 Dr. Wills practiced medicine in Ballarat for several years in the 1850s. According to Keith Bowden, [Gold Rush Doctors at Ballarat, p.44], Wills was a well-known personality in the Ballarat community, ‘gifted with a rare wit’, who became involved in a few quite well-documented debates in Ballarat, particularly relating to the proper qualifications of medical men in the township. He gave evidence at the Eureka inquest regarding the treatment and subsequent death of one of the rebels, Henry Powell.
60 Apparently ‘building the roof and shingling the sides ‘in a most workmanlike manner’, ‘Successful Exploration…’ p. 20.
61 Ibid. p.21.
62 Ibid. p. 18.
63 Ibid. p. 21.
astronomical and magnetic observatory at Williamstown, in Melbourne, under Professor G.B. Neumayer, but the call of the unknown was too strong, and despite urgings from Ellery, the astronomical observatory supervisor, who offered him double pay to remain at his post (where it was believed he had a great future), Wills joined the Victorian Exploration Expedition to the Gulf of Carpentaria. His letters to his mother, back in Devon, in Britain, reveal his excitement and optimism, as well as his fearlessness of what he believed would be the so-called dangers of the expedition.

“You need not work yourself up to such a state of excitement as the bare idea of my going, but should rather rejoice that the opportunity presents itself. The actual danger is nothing, and the positive advantages are very great. Besides, my dear mother, what avails your faith if you terrify yourself about such trifles? Were we born, think you, to be locked up in comfortable rooms, and never to incur the hazard of a mishap? If things were at the worst, I trust I could meet death with as much resignation as others … I am often disgusted at hearing young people I know declare that they are afraid of doing this or that, because they MIGHT be killed. Were I in some of their shoes I should be glad to hail the chance of departing this life fairly in the execution of an honourable duty.”

Dr. Wills, whilst fearing for his son’s safety took a positive interest and initial pride in his son’s participation in the Victorian Exploration Expedition. But in 1861, his increasing anxiety over the lack of news from those embarked on the expedition is reported to have motivated him to walk to Melbourne to achieve some action.

“In the month of June, unable to bear longer suspense, with a small pack on my shoulders and a stick in my hand, I walked from Ballarat to Melbourne, a distance of seventy-five miles, stopping for a couple of nights on the way at the house of a kind and hospitable friend’ …

On arriving in Melbourne, Dr. Wills attempted to rouse up the Exploration Committee to a sense of urgency, and was dismayed at the lack of concern, and the overall lack of functionality of the Exploration Committee. “Mr. Ligar rather rudely asked me what I was in such alarm about; observed that “there was plenty of time; no news was good news; and I had better go home and mind my own business.”

The doctor’s comments on the committee are significant in the light of later public recriminations:

“But I saw now the full misery and imbecility of leaving a large body to decide what should have been delegated to a quorum of three at the most. The meetings took place regularly, but the same members seldom attended twice. New illusions and conceits

64 Ibid. p. 40-41.
65 As the Expedition left Essendon, Dr. Wills commented: “Here I saw my son for the last time. It was with a feeling of great misgiving that I took leave of him. On shaking hands with Mr. Burke, I said frankly “If it were in my power, I would even now prevent his going.” ‘Successful exploration…” p. 57.
66 Ibid. p.129.
suggested themselves as often as different committee-men found it convenient to deliver their opinions and vouchsafe their presence.\textsuperscript{67}

Dr. Wills returned to Ballarat dissatisfied, and then later went back down to Melbourne, where he received the news of his son’s death. He left Ballarat in 1862, and went to London, where he published his late son’s journal \[1863\]. He never returned to Australia, and died on 2\textsuperscript{nd} October 1889, aged 90 years. The final words of his publication on behalf of his son quietly and sadly sum up the tragedy of the expedition which promised so much, yet delivered only tragedy and disappointment:

“The narrative I have felt called upon to give to the public, founded on an unexaggerated statement of facts, with many of which no other person could have been so well acquainted, is now concluded,—with the natural anguish of a father for the loss of a son of whom he was justly proud, and who fell a victim to incapacity and negligence not his own.”\textsuperscript{68}

The Ballarat Monument

... “William John Wills, second in command, and Geographer to the Expedition (for some time a resident of this place) ...”\textsuperscript{69}

In December 1861, the Eastern and Western Ballarat Councils met to discuss a memorial to the explorers. Plans for a lavish clock tower worth £1000 were prepared in February 1862, by architect Canute Andersen, at the request of a committee of the Ballarat faithful. By June 1862, they had only raised £79, and by the end of 1862 the fund stood at £370. Nothing further developed until 7\textsuperscript{th} February 1863, when the foundation stone of the proposed monument was laid, amidst much fanfare, by none other than His Excellency Governor Barkly himself. Much was made of the affair, with a procession of an imposing array of ‘public bodies, benefit societies, volunteers, flags, music and addresses.’\textsuperscript{70} After a dignified speech, the Governor ‘laid’ the foundation stone, and a bottle containing coin of the realm, newspapers of the day, and a memorandum, was placed in the prepared cavity.\textsuperscript{71} Once the formalities were completed, the official party was transported in great splendour and acclamation to Craig’s Hotel, where the governor was staying. The crowd, it has to be said, seemed more excited by the appearance of the Governor, than by the real reason for the celebrations, the commemoration of the hapless explorers. The governor attended a

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid. p.130.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid. p.201.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Transcript of the engrossed memorandum enclosed in the bottle (time capsule), buried in the foundation of the Burke and Wills document, in Ballarat, on 6\textsuperscript{th} February, 1863.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Withers, W., \textit{History of Ballarat}, 2nd Edition, 1887, p. 312.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Contents of the capsule, as at February 1863, \textit{Ballarat Star}, 7\textsuperscript{th} February 1863, “Herewith are deposited the following coins of the Realm, \textit{viz.}, - one sovereign and one half sovereign, in gold; crown piece, half crown, florin, shilling, sixpence, fourpence, and threepence, in silver; one penny, one half-penny, and one farthing, in copper. Also copies of the \textit{Star} and \textit{Tribune}, local newspapers of the same date as undermentioned.” Stone re-laid 27\textsuperscript{th} August, 1867, “This bottle containing the original coins and documents, was replaced by the mayor of the borough, Thomas Davey, Esq., on Monday, the 26\textsuperscript{th} day of August...”
\end{itemize}
'Soiree' at the Mechanics’ Institute, where – amongst other Ballarat worthies – the brother of Wills was present, although not sitting with the dignitaries on the platform, because he had declined that offer. At the foundation stone ceremony, and later at the soiree, His Excellency acknowledged Ballarat’s ‘intimate connection’ with Wills and his family, and congratulated the people of Ballarat on maintaining their enthusiasm for the heroism of the explorers:

“This undiminished sense of the importance of the deed of these brave men, this deeply fixed regard for their memory, it was evident had struck deep root into the hearts of the hard and generous sons of Ballarat. (Applause).”

However, despite the best intentions, once the initial euphoria of the Governor’s visit had died away, the enthusiasm of the public, and of the committee, for a continued commitment to finish constructing the monument died. The council ran into debt, and nothing further happened for an embarrassing three years; the ‘monument’ sat as an ugly bluestone foundation known as ‘the stump’- all that the city could manage in lieu of the projected grandeur of the initial monument. In March 1866 yet another committee was formed by the Western Municipal Council, and after a further 12 months delay, with a diminished amount of money in the coffers, the original design was scrapped, and a much diminished version (the present monument – a fountain) was designed by the original creator, Mr. Andersen. On 26th August 1867, the capsule, which had languished on the mantel-shelf of the town clerk, was re-laid in the cavity, and the foundation stone secured. “The unpretending ceremony having been completed, those officially present repaired to Craig’s Hotel.” Not, one might uncharitably observe, with quite the same pomp and fanfare, or sense of self congratulation which had pervaded the earlier ceremony, four years earlier!

72 Ballarat Star, Supplement, 7th February 1863.
73 Ibid.
74 Star, 27th August 1867.
The Ballarat Monument Today

Explorers’ Fountain, Sturt and Lydiard Streets,
West Ballarat, Victoria 3350.

IN MEMORY OF THE EXPLORERS WHO PERISHED
WHILE CROSSING THE AUSTRALIAN CONTINENT
IN THE YEAR 1861
ERECTED BY THE INHABITANTS OF BALLARAT

ROBERT O’HARA BURKE, LEADER
DIED JUNE 30TH 1861

WILLIAM JOHN WILLS, SECOND
DIED 30TH JUNE 1861

LUDWIG BECKER, NATURALIST
DIED 29TH APRIL 1861

CHARLES GREY, ASSISTANT
DIED 17TH APRIL 1861

JOHN KING THE ONLY SURVIVOR OF THE EXPEDITION
DIED AT ST KILDA JANUARY 15TH 1872

An illustration of the projected design for the original Ballarat Burke and Wills memorial.

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75 http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Memorials/ballarat.htm
76 The original inscriptions only included those who had died and no reference was made to King. His inscription was added after his death
77 Ballarat Historical Society Collection, Gold Museum, Ballarat.
The monument stands proudly at the centre of the city that gold built. And somewhere within the fountain a secret cavity holds a bottle, placed there in 1867. This bottle contains messages from the people of the past to the present generation. Pride – in their city’s wealth and in the magic metal which generated it, and sorrow – for the lost heroes of the Victorian Exploration Expedition - were the messages which the city fathers wished to convey to future generations. But much of the ‘treasure’ within the bottle will now be tarnished, the broadsheets will be crumbled and indecipherable, and the proud words they once contained may appear to those with the gift of hindsight to be haughty, and full of folly.

In fact, the message which the bottle from the past offers us might well be, ultimately, that great wealth comes at a price – and that if future generations choose to ignore this, then they do so at their peril. Like Robert O’Hara Burke and William John Wills, they, too, might find themselves mired in a trackless wilderness from which there is no return.

Appendix

Where did they go, and how long did it take?

Maps of the Burke & Wills route

Burke and Wills timeline