

Seeking signs

OF BURKE AND WILLS



The vehicles crossing the creek arrived in a cloud of dust – the bigger the vehicle the more dust!

In September 2008 I travelled to Innamincka and the 'Corner Country' of New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia to visit some of the sites associated with Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills, the first white men to cross the continent from south to north. Research on exploration for the new *Creating a Country* gallery at the National Museum of Australia led me to Burke and Wills and intense curiosity about that country had prompted my visit. I needed to see for myself the sites of their camps along Cooper Creek. How else could I describe them for others? The most significant place in the Burke and Wills story for me was the Dig tree at the Depot Camp – Burke's Camp 65 – the departure point for the Gulf and also where they returned.

I also visited three other significant places along Cooper Creek: where Burke and Wills died and where John King, the sole survivor of the push to Carpentaria, was found by the relief party lead by Alfred Howitt. King had been sustained and cared for by the Yandruwandha [Jandruwanta] people of Cooper Creek after Burke and Wills died.

The Victorian Exploring Expedition, later known as the Burke and Wills Expedition, left Royal Park in Melbourne on 20 August 1860. It was planned to be the best-equipped expedition and to win glory (and the race to cross the continent) for the young gold-rich colony of Victoria. Mounds of supplies were ordered – including firewood, buckets, boots and gallons of rum (for the camels, said George Landells who had been commissioned to import the beasts of burden from India). Irishman Robert O'Hara Burke was appointed the leader, Landells was second in command and the young surveyor, William John Wills, was third in command.

The journey to Menindee on the Darling River tested the men and the animals but especially Burke, frustrated beyond measure by the expedition's slow pace. The Exploration Committee had specified Cooper's Creek as the depot for the provisions and stores. Burke grew impatient before then. At Menindee he split the party and supplies, and left on 11 November with the best animals and the fittest men.



About 30 metres away from the Dig tree is 'the face tree', where John Dick carved the face of Robert O'Hara Burke in 1898.
Photos: Pip McNaught

He appointed William Wright, a station manager, to bring up the second group.

The place for the Depot was Bulloo Bulloo waterhole on Cooper Creek. Here Burke waited impatiently for the supplies. After five weeks, he appointed William Brahe in charge of the Depot and left for the Gulf of Carpentaria with Wills, Gray and King, six camels and his horse, Billy. Burke and Wills travelled the last 50 kilometres on their own. They reached a tidal channel but could not get through the mangroves to the open ocean. However, they had reached their goal. The weather had been mostly fine on the way up, but now there were storms, torrential rain, extreme heat and humidity. The camels hated the boggy ground. Running out of food, the men began eating the animals. Gray was ill and grew weaker, though the others did not believe he was really ill. He was found eating some stolen food and beaten by Burke. Gray died on 17 April and Burke, Wills and King buried him. In their weakened state it took them one day to dig the hard ground. That they went to such effort perhaps suggests they felt guilty?

On 21 April 1861, totally exhausted, almost starving and hardly able to walk, they returned to the Depot expecting succour and a rousing welcome from friendly faces. The camp was deserted, their fellow expeditioners gone. They saw the words 'Dig' carved on a tree, and found some supplies and a note from Brahe and discovered the party had left that very morning. Burke decided not to follow Brahe but set off in the opposite direction, towards Mt Hopeless. Wills and King wanted to follow Brahe but in the end they followed their leader. There was more disaster: the camels died and the trio could not find water inland and had to return to the Cooper. For a while they were supplied with fish and nardoo (*Marsilea drummondii*) by the Aboriginal people. When their benefactors left they existed on nardoo alone, which made

them feel full but was not nutritious. They had succeeded in crossing the continent but died of starvation a few kilometres apart on Cooper Creek. Confirmation of their tragic deaths ignited immense popular sympathy and grief, culminating in the first state funeral on 21 January 1863.

THE DIG TREE TODAY

The story is well known but what are these places like today? In September 2008 Innamincka was hot and dusty but the waterholes are beautiful. The ground around the hotel was hard and stony, with Cooper Creek visible as a slash of green in the red landscape.

The Dig tree is about 80 kilometres away on a dirt road. The Dig tree is easily recognisable. It is a large tree with a wooden boardwalk around it to protect it from all the visitors. The ground around the tree, and the so-called 'camel box' tree nearby, was dry and hard with a layer of grey, dusty sand on top. It looked difficult land in which to dig to bury a box of supplies. Or perhaps the feet of the many visitors have hardened it in the last 150 years? The day I was there, at 9 am, there were only about seven other visitors. It seemed rather desolate, quiet and still, an isolated place even today.

A small covered area has information about Burke and Wills, but it all looks a bit haphazard and neglected. The information boards are faded and some are weather or mould-stained. Visitors have added to the printed information and typed or handwritten sheets were pinned to the boards. Many, it seems, have something to say about Burke and Wills, even after 150 years.

It is also believed that John Dick photographed the blazes with the letters outlined in white. The most surprising thing is that the famous blazes are no longer there. They have almost completely closed and are now just two small holes in the bark. No letters or numbers are visible. The evidence has disappeared.

The carving of Burke's face and the blaze on the creek side of the Dig tree, (B/LXV), have not grown over and appear, it seems, as they were when they were carved. Neither is there any remnant of the stockade built by the Depot party and named 'Fort Wills'. Visible in photographs of 1898, 1919 and 1934, all traces of it have now disappeared, taken by the irregular but inundating floods of the Cooper, possibly aided by souvenir hunters.



Fort Wills, Burke and Wills' depot at Cooper's Creek.
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