

IN MEMORY OF THE EXPLORER CAPTAIN CHARLES STURT 1795 – 1869

In this year we recall that Captain Charles Sturt is numbered amongst those intrepid explorers of the 19th century whose discoveries opened up the continent of Australia and thereby shaped its future history. Counted in that company were men such as Blaxland, Wentworth, and Lawson, who first crossed the 'Blue Mountains', Evans who first crossed the 'Great Dividing Range and discovered the "Lachlan River", Cunningham the botanist who discovered the stock route to the Liverpool Plains, Hume and Hovell whose epic journey from Sydney to Port Phillip Bay opened up that route for commerce, Hawdon the pioneer of the overland cattle drives to Victoria and South Australia, Mitchell who was without doubt the greatest of all the colonial surveyors and the discoverer of the 'Gippsland' area, and John Oxley the Colonial Surveyor and notable explorer whose explorations and advice directed Sturt's footsteps to that path that was to change his life for ever.

In 1817, in the company of Cunningham and Evans, Oxley explored the 'Lachlan River' to the point where it vanished in a vast area of swamps and almost impenetrable reeds which became known as the 'Macquarie Marshes'. In 1818, Oxley explored the 'Macquarie River' which again vanished in those same marshlands and he concluded that those rivers fed a great inland swamp that might border an inland sea. This concept started to dominate the geographical thinking of those days but following his expeditions of 1819 and 1823, ill health prevented him from finally solving the mystery of the marshes.



In 1828, Governor Darling appointed Sturt, with Hamilton Hume as his second in command, to explore the area of the Macquarie Marshes. Unlike Oxley, who found the area in flood, Sturt experienced severe drought conditions but even in its reduced state, the extensive Macquarie Marsh system still posed a formidable obstacle to his party. However, the drought assisted Sturt to conclusively prove that it did not form any part of an inland sea. Breaking out of the marshes, he followed the course of a river he named the 'New Year Creek', but which later proved to be a continuation of the 'Bogan', until it led him to its junction with another unknown river which he named the 'Darling'. This river too was affected by the drought which had reduced it to a series of pools, some of which were saline because of the brine springs that welled up in parts of its watercourse. Travelling in a south westerly direction, Sturt followed it to a place near to which the town of 'Bourke' now stands, at which point he turned back and returned to Sydney, convinced that the 'Darling' fed into yet another westerly river system. This opinion was based on Oxley's exploration of the 'Lachlan' which confirmed that river flowed in a south westerly direction and the aboriginal stories that told of another big river to the west upon which its people travelled in bark canoes and caught huge fish.

In 1829, faced with this information, Governor Darling determined to send Sturt on yet another expedition to *'follow the course of the 'Morumbidgee River wherever it may lead'*. This decision was not based on a mere whim, but very sound logic.

In 1828, the Captain of the sealing ship 'Prince of Denmark' had reported to 'Darling' that in pursuit of seals, he had gained entry into a large freshwater lake known as 'the Sealer's Lagoon', via an opening in the sandhills, through which it emptied into 'Encounter Bay'. In that report the Captain also ventured the opinion that the lake appeared to be fed from another very large body of water. In 1824, 'Hamilton Hume discovered a very large river (which he named the 'Hume'), that flowed in a westerly direction, whilst 'Oxley' and 'Sturt' had established that both the 'Lachlan' and 'Darling' rivers also flowed in a south westerly direction. It was also known that the 'Morumbidgee' also flowed in that same south westerly direction, so the evidence was overwhelming that 'somewhere' there was yet another major river system and the resolution of that question was now fell to 'Captain Charles Sturt'.

On November 10, 1829, with a party of convicts, soldiers and a disassembled whaleboat, Sturt set out from Sydney and followed the "Morumbidgee" from 'Jugiong' to a point near what is now the town of 'Maude', where he assembled the whaleboat, and also constructed another small boat from local materials. At 7.00am, on January 7, 1830, Sturt and seven companions embarked on the 'Morumbidgee' on the venture that was to end at 'Encounter Bay' on February 11, 1830. Along that journey they were to experience privation and danger, confirm that the 'Lachlan' joined the 'Morumbidgee', which in turn joined a *'broad and noble stream'* that Sturt named the "Murray", upon whose waters he was carried to his date with destiny. Near the present site of 'Wentworth', the party survived a confrontation with an aboriginal war party, discovered that near that place the 'Darling' joined the "Murray", and went on to confirm that the 'Murray' flowed into the 'Sealer's Lagoon'. He named these waters 'Lake Alexandrina' after the Princess who was later to become 'Queen Victoria', and established that they emptied into 'Encounter Bay', as predicted by the Captain of the 'Prince of Denmark', and the riddle was solved. Turning homewards, against a river that was rising in flood, they began their perilous return. After long and arduous rowing the

exhausted party finally landed at 'Hamilton Plains' and then proceeded overland to 'Sydney' where they arrived on May 25, 1830. Their journey of discovery had taken them six months, traversed some two thousand miles (3,330 Kilometres) by water and unlocked the riddle of the south western river system of Australia. The veil had been lifted and new lands were there for the taking.

Sturt then returned to garrison duties with the 39th Regiment of Foot which included a stint at 'Norfolk Island' but his military career was at an end. In 1832 he returned to England, where in 1833 he published the story of his explorations in a book titled 'Two Expeditions Into The Interior of Southern Australia'. In that book he included the journal of another brother officer of the 39th, 'Captain Captain Collett Barker', whom Governor Darling had directed to explore the area around 'Mount Lofty' and the sea mouth of the 'Murray' at 'Encounter Bay', prior to his return to 'Sydney' from his garrison duties in 'Western Australia'.

On April 10, 1831, Barker and his party arrived and landed at 'Holdfast Bay', exploring the area around 'Port Adelaide, the 'Adelaide Plains', Mount Lofty and the surrounding ranges. He then travelled to the sea mouth of the 'Murray' at Encounter Bay, where he swam across to the large sandhill on the other side. He climbed this feature which later became known as 'Barker's Knoll', descended the other side and was never seen again. It was later established that he had been speared to death by aborigines and his body thrown into the sea. However, his journal survived, found its way to England and into Sturt's book. This book became a best seller which with 'Barker's report' fired the imagination of people such as Edward Gibbon Wakefield and Robert Gouger who were seeking a site for a 'free settlement'. It was to prove the catalyst that resulted in the establishment of the free and unique Colony of South Australia in 1836.

Having decided to leave the army and become a settler, Sturt sold his Captain's commission in the 39th Regiment of Foot, obtained a land grant and married 'Charlotte Christiana Greene'. In 1834, he embarked for 'Sydney' and became a farmer at a place known as 'Bargo Brush' at which place his first son (Napier George) was born. He next moved to a property at 'Varrowville' but he did not prosper because of a crippling drought that lasted for several years. In 1838, he decided to emulate 'Hawdon and Bonney' and 'Edward John Eyre' who had set out separately to drive cattle overland to the new Colony of South Australia, where it was believed that a ready market waited them. Sturt determined to set out from the area where in 1824 'Hamilton Hume' had discovered and named the 'Hume River', and to trace and map the course of the 'Hume' to its junction with the 'Murray'. On May 22, 1838, he set out from 'Fowler's Station' for Adelaide, following the course of the 'Hume' to its junction with the 'Morumbidgee' at which point Sturt claimed to have discovered the 'Murray River'. Continuing to follow its course he finally reached Adelaide on August 27, 1838, where he received a tumultuous welcome and an official dinner at which he was the guest of honour. Whilst in Adelaide he agreed to lead an expedition to 'Encounter Bay' to resolve the vexed question as to whether or not it was a safe anchorage for shipping and thus an alternative site for the capital of the colony. He was able to report that no such safe anchorage existed and the matter was settled once and for all. Departing the colony on October 16, he returned to 'Sydney Cove' on October 30, 1838, and his second son (Charles Sheppey), born during his absence.

On February 27, 1839, having accepted 'Gawler's' offer of the post of Colonial Surveyor of South Australia, Sturt sold his property and with his family took ship for Adelaide, where he arrived on April 2, taking up residence in Adelaide on Town Acre 288, which was on the corner of Frome and Wakefield Streets, and accessed from East Terrace. Here his third son ('Evelyn Gawler') was born and where Sturt remained until some time in 1841 when he moved to his new residence built on land granted to him at the 'Reedbeds'. He named this house 'Grange' and it was here that his only daughter (Charlotte Eyre) was born in 1843. Many years later when the property was sold and subdivided, the new suburb took the name of the house and became known as 'The Grange'. This was later changed to 'Grange'.

Sturt's tenure as Colonial Secretary proved to be very brief, because its rightful occupant 'Frome' arrived in the colony some three months later and Sturt was relegated to the position of 'Assistant Commissioner of Lands' at a much reduced salary. From then his circumstances went from bad to worse. 'Gawler' was recalled and replaced by 'Grey', an appointment that Sturt bitterly resented. His salary had been cut by two hundred pounds per annum, he had been unable to sell his cottage on East Terrace, and he bore the burden of a mortgage on his new residence. He also smarted under the belief that he had not received due recognition for his past achievements nor adequately rewarded for them. To escape this poisonous environment he applied to lead a grandiose expedition across Australia, but it was refused. Finally he appointed to lead an expedition into the hinterland of South Australia in search of the mythical 'Inland Sea'. Little did he know that he was to traverse a waterless land that was in the grip of a terrible drought.

On August 10, 1844, with 15 men, 11 horses, 32 bullocks, 6 drays, a light carriage, 200 sheep, a boat and boat carriage, and several dogs, Sturt's expedition departed Adelaide on what he predicted would prove 'a fearful but splendid enterprise'. Eight days later the party reached 'Moorundie', then followed the Murray River to its junction with the Darling, then along its course to the vicinity of 'Lake Cawndilla'. Here they camped for two months, exploring the surrounding country and mountain range they named the 'Barrier Range'. In December, desperately short of water, the party moved further north into the 'Grey Range', where they located a permanent source of water and made camp. They named these waters

'Preservation Creek' and the site of their encampment, 'Depot Glen'. Their discovery was fortuitous because the extreme summer heat had dried up all the surface water within easy reach. They remained trapped at 'Depot Glen' from January 27, 1845 to July, 27, 1845, in temperatures so extreme that they were forced to dig an underground in order to survive. Both men and animals and their equipment suffered terribly from the intolerable heat. In the case of the men, the lack of an adequate diet was to claim the life of Sturt's second-in-command, James Poole, who died of scurvy.

In July, 1845, there were very heavy rainfalls which enabled Sturt's party to explore to the northwest to Fort Grey and for three months the little party travelled over a desolate landscape and crossed the 'Stony Desert'. Finally, defeated by the red sand dunes of the Simpson Desert and suffering from a lack of water, Sturt reluctantly came to the realization that his mythical 'Inland Sea' did not exist. Exhausted and dispirited, he returned to Depot Glen, where following an altercation with Dr. John Harris-Browne, he determined to mount one last expedition. This proved more fruitful in that he discovered the permanent waters of 'Cooper Creek', but with exhausted horses and himself physically spent and near death from scurvy he was forced to return to Depot Glen. Following fortuitous thunderstorms which replenished the surface water along their intended escape route, Harris-Browne took charge of the party. Loading Sturt into the spring cart he made a dash for 'Cawndilla' and thence the 'Darling River'. Having rested the party, Harris-Browne then travelled on to 'Moorundie' and thence to Adelaide where on January 28, 1846, the gaunt, blackened survivors and their equally gaunt horses and bullocks wended their silent way up King William Street to Victoria Square. Daniel Brock, the gunsmith and bird skinner of the expedition made an entry in his diary on that day that said it all. *"I am home!"*

Although the expedition was a commercial failure, in that the expedition had not discovered useful water or fertile land, Sturt had discovered the 'Cooper Creek' and penetrated inland to within 240 kilometres of the geographical centre of 'Australia'. Along the way had noted, without realizing their full significance, that the geological strata of the 'Barrier Ranges' *'had good ore bearing potential'*. Many years later that potential would be realized and give rise to the mining town of 'Broken Hill'. In that way, Sturt's expedition did prepare the way for those who followed, and one of those was a member of his own party, John McDouall Stuart, who went on to become a noted explorer and the first man to cross the continent from South to North and to return safely.

Sturt returned to England where he wrote his 'Narrative of an Expedition To Central Australia 1844-46' and in 1847 was awarded the 'Founder's Medal' of 'The Royal Geographic Society'. In 1849 he was given the post of Colonial Secretary of South Australia and a seat in its Legislative Council, but his health deteriorated forcing his retirement in 1851. He returned to England in 1853 and took up residence in Cheltenham, from where he regularly communicated to his many friends and admirers but as time passed he was saddened by the deaths of family members, including his son Evelyn who died in India of cholera. After numerous attempts for another government appointment or the bestowal of a knighthood, his latter wish was finally granted.

In recognition of his services to 'Queen and Country' it was decreed that he be awarded of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (K.C.M.G.) but fate intervened. On June 16, 1869, before the award was gazetted, Captain Charles Sturt died suddenly from heart failure. His biographer eloquently records *"there was no sign of pain or struggle: he smiled placid as a child asleep. On the brow unadorned by man death had laid gently the crown of a great life's fulfillment"*.

On January 22, 1869, Captain Charles Sturt was laid to rest at 'Prestbury' near 'Cheltenham'. The spot is marked by a stone cross which as he would have wished bears the words: *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me"*. In recognition of his service to his Queen and Country, Queen Victoria ordered that henceforth Mrs. Sturt was entitled to use the title and to be addressed as 'Lady Sturt' and she was granted a Civil List Pension of £80.

Thus from this mortal coil passed the explorer Captain Charles Sturt, but his legacy remains. His explorations opened up vast tracts of land for settlement thereby accelerating the growth of the nation, whilst his journals provided the catalyst that resulted in the establishment of the colony of South Australia, in which he became one of its foremost pioneers. History records the significant part that he played in the early days of this unique colony of South Australia, whose citizens were to significantly influence the events that culminated in the Federation of Australia.

'Captain Charles Sturt' was in every way a man of his times and that is the yardstick by which he must be measured and judged. He was first and foremost a devout follower of the Christian Faith, a loving father and husband, and a most loyal subject of his sovereign. He was by his birth and upbringing, a gentleman and a soldier, committed to the service of his "God, Queen and Country", and should fate have so decreed he would have willingly laid down his life for those tenets. This was the measure of the man and that is how he should be remembered.

“VALE CHARLES STURT”

Late Captain of the 39th Regiment of Foot. Explorer.
Fellow and Gold Medallist of The Royal Geographical Society.
Fellow of the Linnean Society.



Grave on the left 'Charles Sheppey Sturt – Grave on the right 'Charles Sturt, Mrs Sturt & Charlotte Sturt'