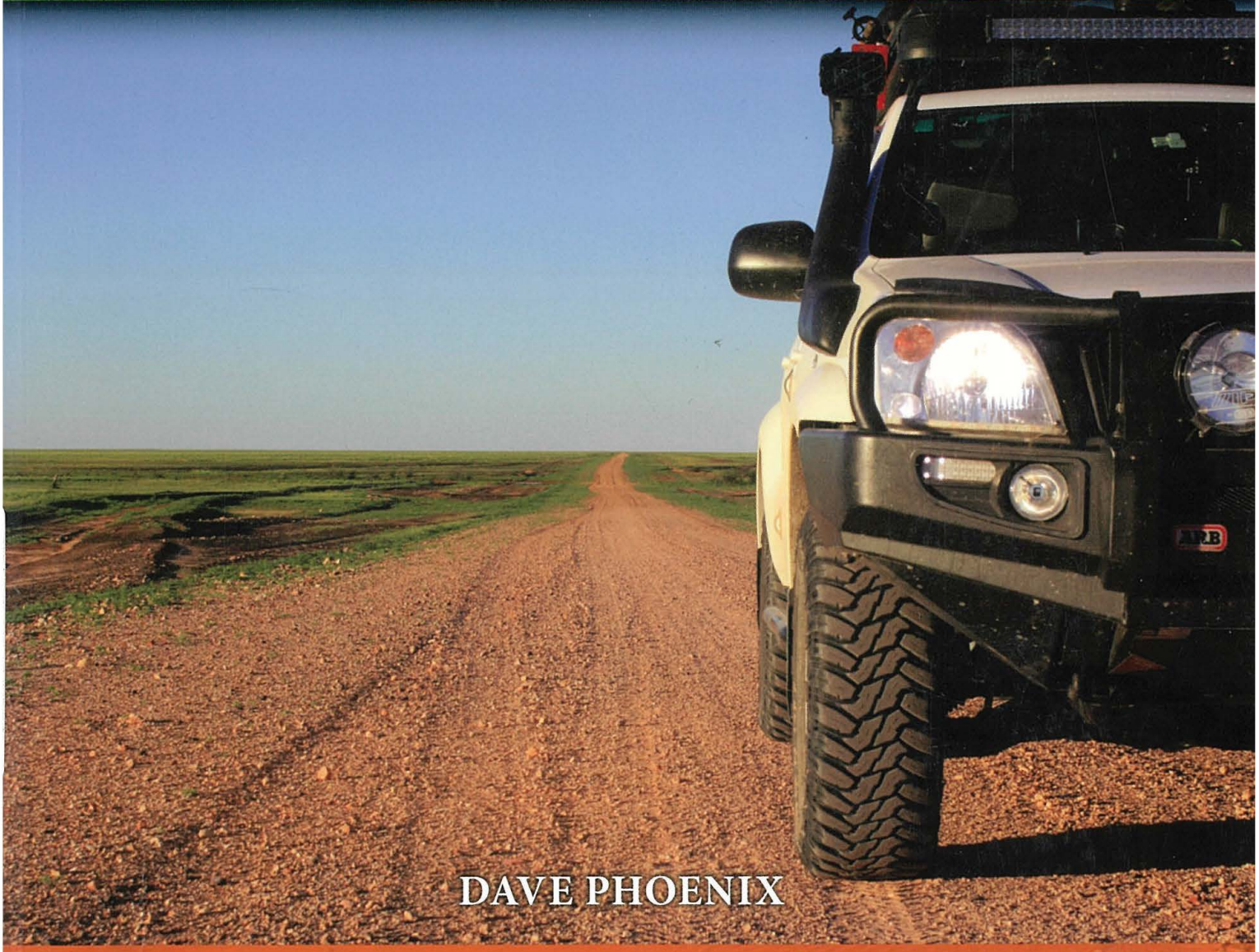
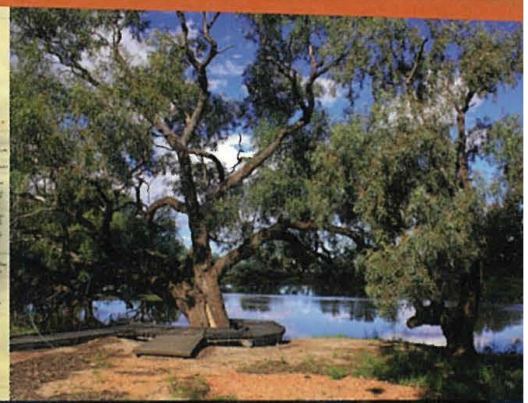
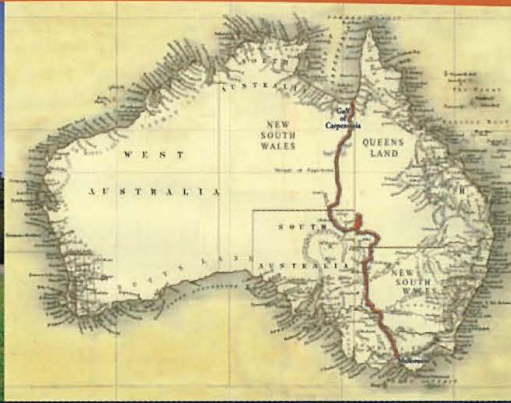
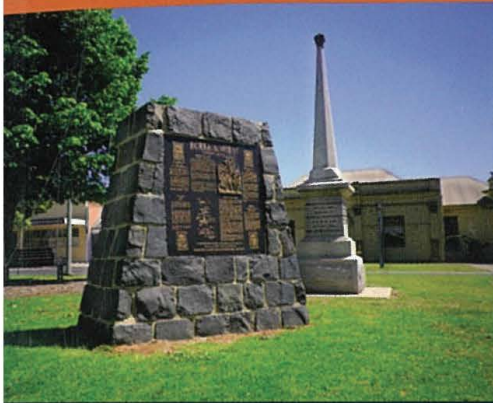


Following Burke and Wills Across Australia

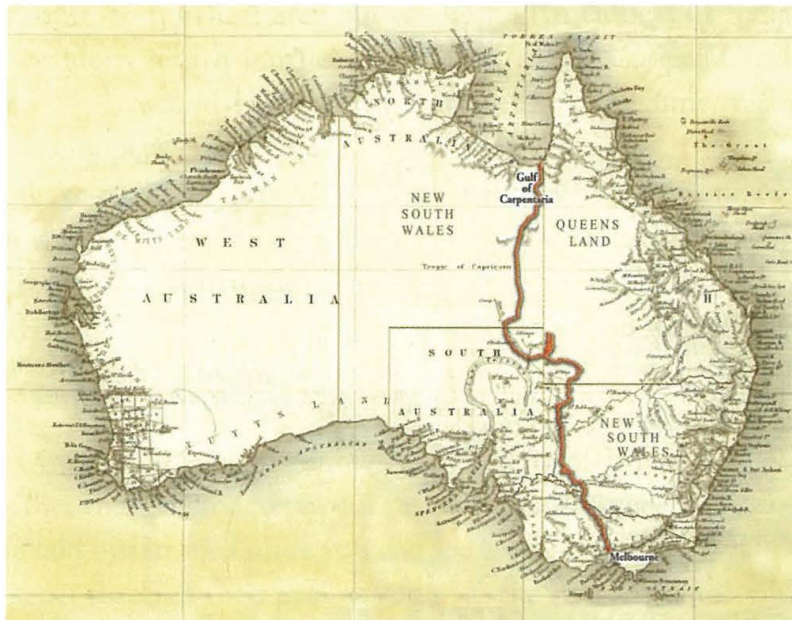
A TOURING GUIDE



DAVE PHOENIX

Following Burke and Wills Across Australia

A TOURING GUIDE



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PUBLISHING

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Foreword

In the 150 years since the Victorian Exploring Expedition ended in tragedy at Cooper Creek, the story of Burke and Wills has become an Australian legend. It is a significant part of our culture, having inspired dozens of books, several films, assorted music and a host of paintings, the best known by William Strutt and Sidney Nolan. Events from the story are used by political cartoonists. There is even a competitive computer game based on the epic journey.

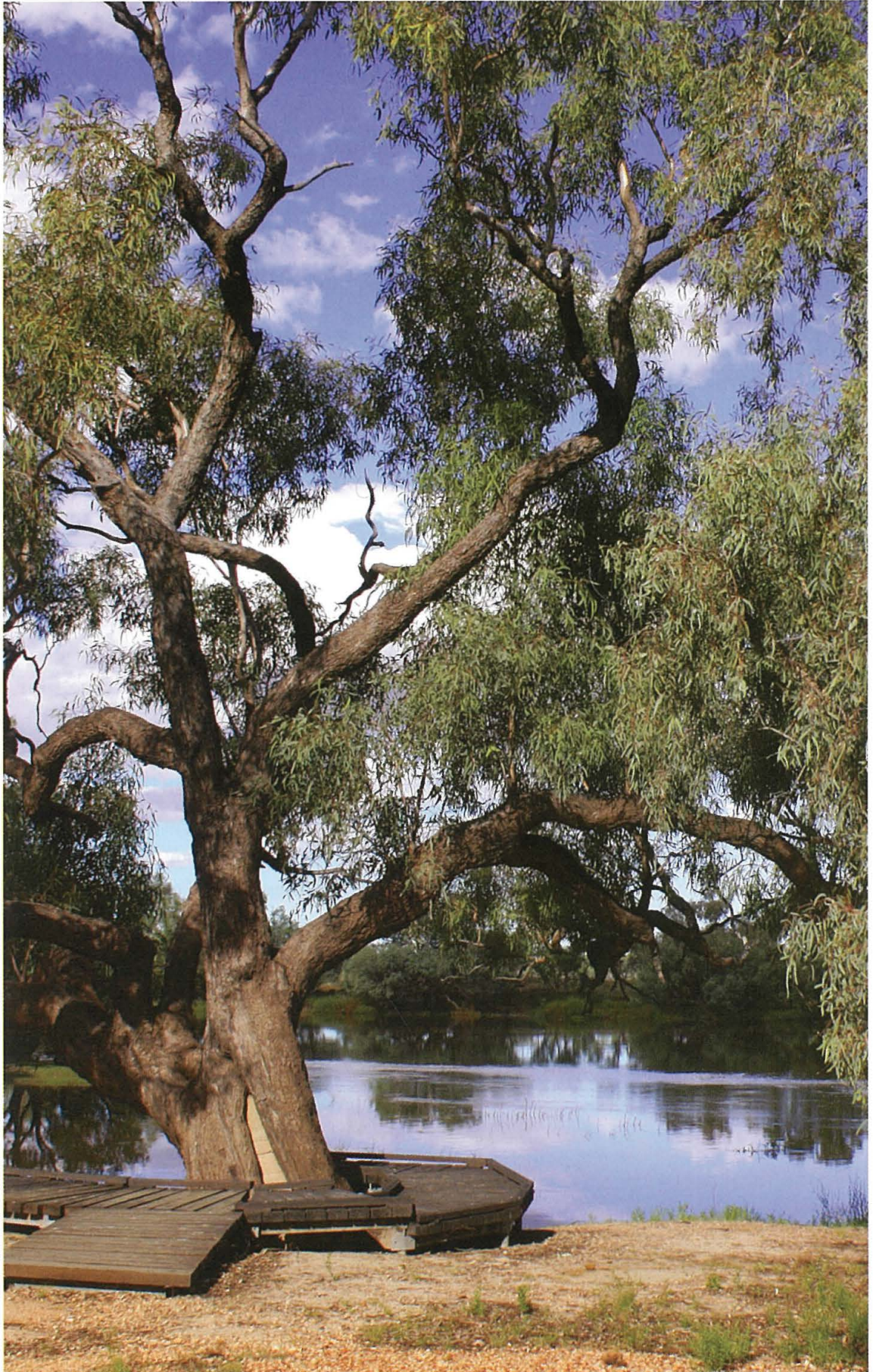
In earlier times, Burke and Wills were held up as examples of enterprise and bravery. Monuments to their memory were erected in major towns in both Victoria and their home towns in Ireland and the UK. Today it has become more fashionable to see them as failures. If current politicians liken each other to Burke and Wills it would be as an insult, not a compliment.

But the Expedition largely achieved its objective. Burke and Wills were the first to cross Australia from south to north. Three out of the four members of their party survived the extraordinarily arduous return journey from the Gulf to Cooper Creek. If their luck had held, Burke and Wills would have returned to a hero's welcome, rather than dying slow deaths beside the Cooper.

Those who have travelled through the same country as Burke and Wills do not see them as failures. They appreciate and admire the extraordinary achievement of these four men who walked across the continent during the heat of summer and the wet season, with their pack animals dying one by one and with inadequate food and water. Even the earliest part of the Expedition's journey, crossing Victoria during the winter, involved extreme difficulty and privation.

For those who would like to follow in the steps of Burke and Wills, and judge for themselves whether these men deserve our respect, I recommend this Touring Guide. As you follow the route laid out in the Guide you can see for yourself the terrain they crossed, and at the same time see it through their eyes as you read the first-hand accounts from diaries. The many signs and memorials you will observe along the way show how significant Burke and Wills remain, 150 years later, in the Australian consciousness.

The Honourable Dr Barry Jones AC



The Dig Tree, Burke's Depot Camp on Cooper Creek.

Contents

Foreword	iii
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	ix
Using the touring guide	xiii
1 Melbourne	1
In 1860	1
Now	4
2 Leaving Melbourne	11
In 1860	11
Now	15
3 Crossing the mountains: Bulla to Knowsley	21
In 1860	21
Now	27
Bendigo, Castlemaine and Fryerstown	32
4 Crossing the plains: Knowsley to Tragowel	39
In 1860	39
Now	51
5 Along the rivers: Tragowel to Swan Hill	61
In 1860	61
Now	69
6 Swan Hill to Balranald	79
In 1860	79
Now	90
7 Balranald to Pooncarie	95
In 1860	95
Now	124
8 Pooncarie to Menindee	133
In 1860	133
Now	148
9 Menindee to Mutawintji	157
In 1860	157
The Pamamaroo Depot and Wright's supply party	164
Now	165
10 Mutawintji to Tibooburra	177
In 1860	177
The Pamamaroo Depot and Wright's supply party: 1860 and 1861	193
Now	198

11	Tibooburra to Thargomindah	205
	In 1860	205
	Now	211
12	Thargomindah to Innamincka	217
	In 1860	217
	In 1861: Brahe's Depot Party	235
	Now	237
13	Innamincka to Birdsville	253
	Going north	253
	Returning from the Gulf	270
	In 1861: the deaths of Burke and Wills	277
	Now	280
14	Birdsville to Boulia	295
	Going north	295
	Returning from the Gulf: March–April 1861	308
	Now	314
15	Boulia to Cloncurry	323
	Going north	323
	Returning from the Gulf: March 1861	334
	Now	339
16	Cloncurry to Karumba	351
	Going north	351
	Returning from the Gulf: February–March 1861	361
	Now	370
	Selected references	380
	Glossary	381
	Index	383
	People	383
	Places	386
	Miscellaneous	391

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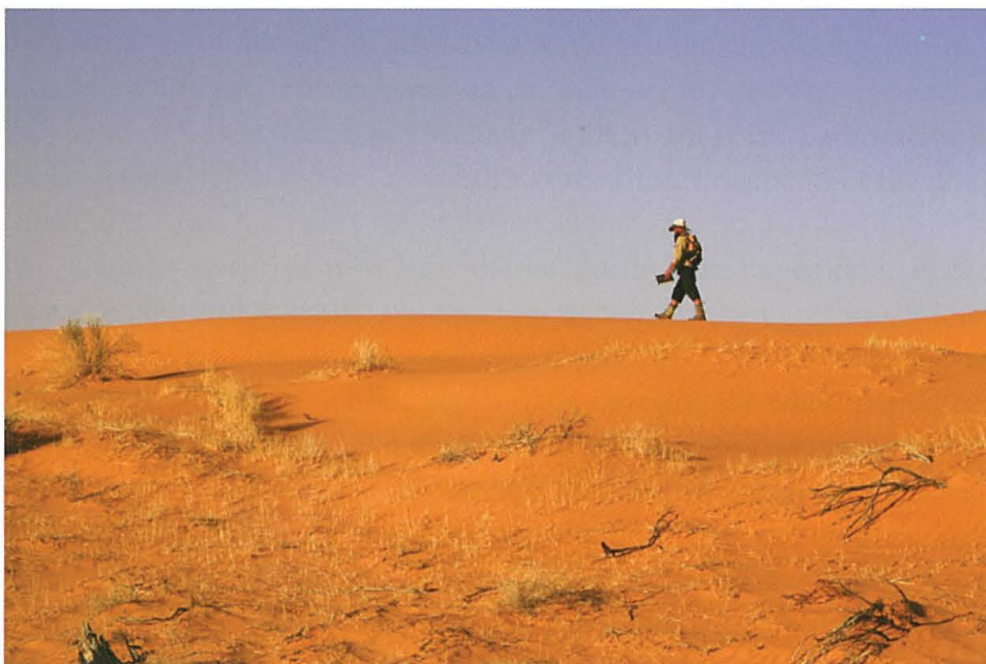
Don Hopping and Carroll Peko test-drove the route in Victoria and provided invaluable feedback. Helen Vorrath and Peter Thorne conducted field research in New South Wales and Annie Fishburn conducted field research in Queensland.

Stephen Jeffries generously allowed sections of his translation of Beckler's diary to be reproduced.

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- Royal Society of Victoria, for use of the Expedition's archives in the Royal Society of Victoria Collection in the State Library of Victoria.

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Dave in the Strzelecki Desert during his Burke and Wills Walk, October 2008.

Spatial data

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GPS data is GDA94.

Acknowledgement of Country

The author would like to acknowledge the Aboriginal people of the many different indigenous nations that the Burke and Wills Expedition passed through on their journey across the continent and pay respect to the traditional custodians of this land and their elders past and present.

The subject of this work may include images and names of deceased people; it may also include words and descriptive terms that may be offensive to Indigenous Australians. This work is presented as part of the record of the past; contemporary readers should interpret the work within that context.

Introduction

Identifying the Expedition's route

Although the Victorian Exploring Expedition (VEE) is the most famous of all Australian expeditions, the route Burke took from Melbourne to the Gulf has remained somewhat of a mystery. Although several people have been credited with retracing the route – George McGillivray and George Ernest Morrison on foot; Tom Bergin with camels; Francis Birtles and Alfred Towner by car – none of these attempts delved into the Expedition's archives with sufficient depth to accurately define the route. The track described in this Guide is based on an extensive search of the archives combined with numerous field excursions, including Phoenix's five-month walk across Australia. As with all historical projects of this nature, it is a work in progress, which can be built upon as new evidence is uncovered.

Although the Expedition's archives are extensive, one of the main problems faced by researchers is that the records are incomplete because the leader did not leave a comprehensive journal, even though this was common practice at the time. Burke did keep some records during the early stages of the Expedition and later on he attempted to keep a diary, but the entries are brief. Consequently the archival material left by other members takes on particular importance in establishing a chronology of events and defining the Expedition's track.

Wills submitted three detailed reports to the Exploration Committee between Balranald and Cooper Creek. He also kept meticulous records and a diary in a series of field-books, for the entire journey to the Gulf. Only in the last weeks of the return journey did he stop making daily entries. All these records came back to Melbourne; however, many of the field-books containing the navigational data for the journey between Cooper Creek and the Gulf were lost before they were transcribed.

As the sole survivor of the four-man party that reached the Gulf, King's version of events was particularly significant. He narrated an account to his rescuer, Howitt, as well as additional accounts to Edwin Welch and Melbourne journalist James Smith. King apparently kept a rudimentary diary, but did not reveal this at the time. Fragments of the diary came to light only in 1936.

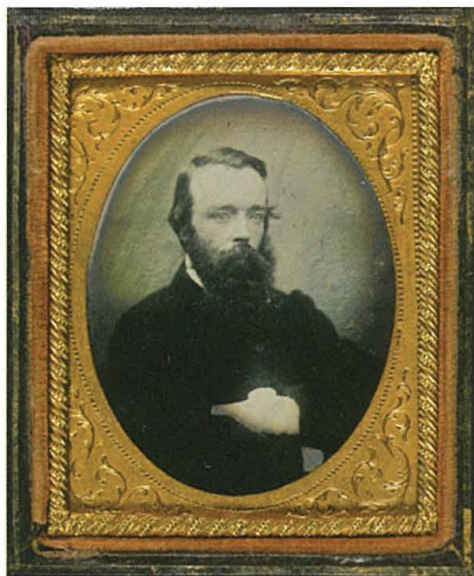
The two German scientists also kept diaries during the Expedition. Becker's diary, reports, maps, sketches and scientific observations document the Expedition's journey from Melbourne to Menindee. Beckler also submitted sketches and scientific reports to the Exploration Committee. In addition, he kept a diary covering the whole period he was with the VEE, but he retained it rather than handing it over to the Commission of Enquiry or to the Exploration Committee. Later, after he had returned to Germany, Beckler wrote an account of the Expedition in German. This account remained unpublished and came to light only in 1954. It has since been translated by Stephen Jeffries and is quoted with his permission. Because it was written much later, Beckler was able to apply hindsight to his reflections.

Neumayer recorded his experiences with the VEE between Balranald and Bilbarka. Landells sent letters to the press and to the Exploration Committee presenting his side of his disagreement with Burke. Wills wrote to Neumayer supporting Burke.

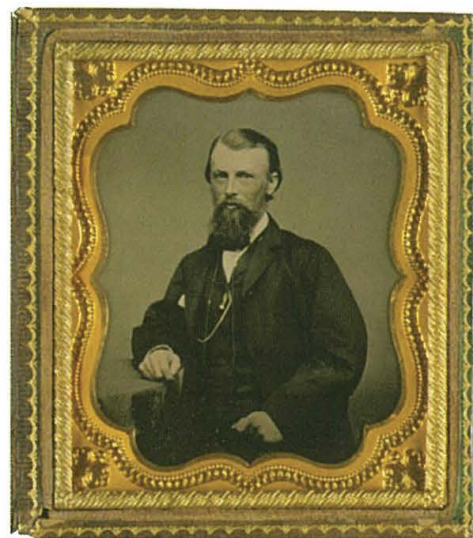
Wright kept a diary recording the progress of the supply party in 1861, which supplements Beckler's account and has the advantage of being written as events unfolded. Brahe also wrote an account of his time in charge of Depot Camp 65 at Cooper Creek.

The minutes of meetings and the financial records of the Exploration Committee add further to our understanding of the VEE's progress between Melbourne and Menindee. Contemporary accounts in newspapers are used to provide other views, particularly those reporting the passage of the Expedition through Victoria and the experiences of Lyons and Macpherson. The final source is the evidence presented to the Commission of Enquiry into the deaths of Burke and Wills, the report of which was published in 1862.

The surviving archive documents are held in the State Library of Victoria, the Public Records Office of Victoria, the National Library of Australia and the State Library of New South Wales. Many of these archives have been digitised and can be viewed online. Transcriptions of the expedition's journals, diaries, reports, despatches, letters and telegrams are available at Phoenix's website: burkeandwills.net.au.



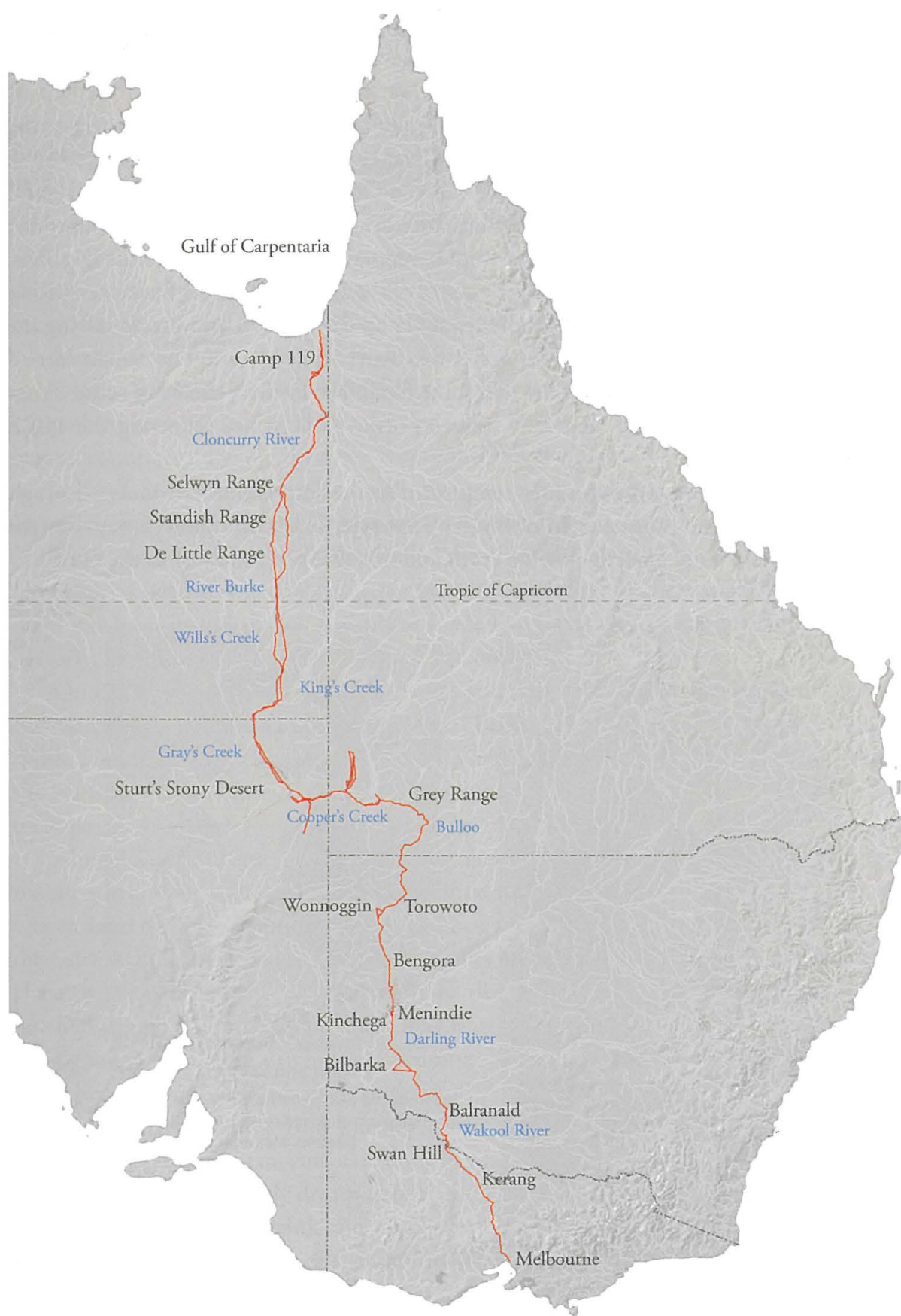
Portrait of Robert O'Hara Burke
Item 1, D 179, Mitchell Library, State Library
of New South Wales.



Thomas Adams Hill, Wm. J. Wills,
1834–1861, c.1860.
Image a128695, MIN 50, Mitchell Library, State
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The Expedition's journey: 1860–1861

When the VEE left Melbourne they had heavily laden wagons, so the Expedition followed roads and tracks through Victoria. To avoid delays they bypassed the gold mining towns of Heathcote, Castlemaine and Bendigo, heading instead to Lancefield to cross the Dividing Range. Burke then made for punts at crossing points on the Campaspe, Murray, Wakool and Murrumbidgee Rivers. Once across the Murrumbidgee, Aboriginal guides led them along rough bush tracks through the mallee, past a handful of outlying stations and shepherds' huts. They reached the Darling at Tarcoola, where they loaded their equipment onto a paddle-steamer and abandoned the wagons.



The Expedition's track across Australia.

The Expedition followed the Darling upstream as far as Menindee, the last European outpost. Beyond Menindee the VEE relied on the help of a local man and two Aboriginal guides, who accompanied them as far as Torowoto swamp. From Torowoto to the Bulloo River more Aboriginal guides led them from one water source to the next across the vast mudplains of the Bulloo River Overflow. Beyond Bulloo, Wills was called on to navigate the VEE over the Grey Range and along the Wilson River floodplain to Cooper Creek.

The VEE established a depot at Camp 63 at the Cooper, and Wills set out on several reconnaissance trips to the north. A plague of rats forced Burke to move the Depot downstream to Depot Camp 65 at the coolibah tree that would eventually become known as the Dig Tree.

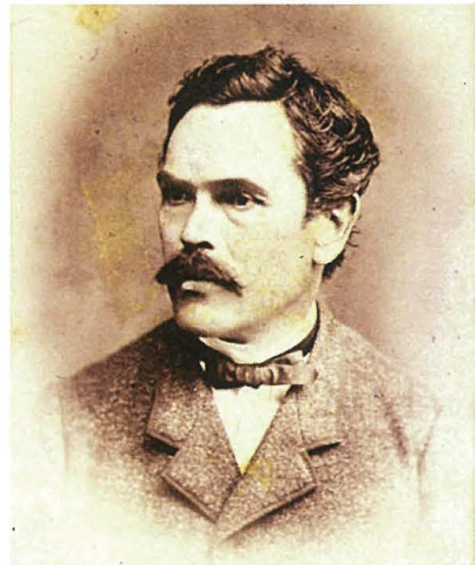
Wills was unable to find any water to the north of the Depot Camp, so Burke decided to head north-west towards Eyre Creek. From Depot Camp 65 they headed west, following the Cooper, but then struck out to the north-west across Sturt Stony Desert. The camels carried several days' supply of water, so the men had some flexibility in their choice of route. From the Diamantina River the VEE generally headed north, more or less following the 140°E meridian.

In addition to the extreme summer temperatures, the Expedition encountered tough conditions in the rugged ranges north of Boulia. However, once they found a way over the Selwyn Range they found a north-flowing creek and followed it all the way to the Gulf.



Frederick Schoenfeld, *Ludwig Becker*,
c. 1850–60.

H84.273/2, State Library of Victoria.



Hermann Beckler.

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