



**State Library  
of Victoria**

# **Expedition: Burke & Wills**

**Education  
resource**

**YEARS 7-10  
(VELS LEVEL 5 & 6)  
SCIENCE, ENGLISH, THE ARTS,  
HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY**



Studying the Burke and Wills Victorian Exploring Expedition of 1860–61 provides an opportunity to engage with a gripping story and to examine a range of themes and curriculum areas through a unique lens. 'Expedition' is an education resource designed for secondary students in Years 7 to 10 (VELS 5 and 6), but many of the activities can be adapted for older or younger students as well.

This resource is designed to be used with a range of information sources, including online content such as the State Library of Victoria Burke and Wills website, which is a rich source of information on the expedition. The resource presumes that the teacher is familiar with this material.

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## How to use this resource

This resource includes 18 lesson plans and associated worksheets, transcripts of documents from the period of the expedition, including letters and journal excerpts, and a short overview of the story of the expedition. The lesson plans are categorised by the VELS Domains of Science, English, the Arts, History and Geography, and also include cross-curriculum links.

Thematic links between the lessons will allow them to be used as an integrated unit of work, or even as a special themed week. The lessons can be run simply as outlined, or the themes and concepts can be expanded if the resource is used for a dedicated period of work. Each lesson has a list of extension activities, any of which could be used as the basis of an individual project. The lesson plans and worksheets are supplied as Word documents so that teachers can modify them as required.

Lesson lengths are not specified. Each lesson plan is designed to be completed within a class lesson period, but could equally work over two, or serve as the basis for small units of their own.

## Introduction to the Expedition

The Victorian Exploring Expedition of 1860–61 was seen, even at the time, as a pivotal event in the history of the young colony of Victoria. Every aspect of the Expedition became a major occasion, from the arrival of the exotic camels, to the carnival atmosphere of the departure, to the final, sombre funeral procession years later. Now, 150 years later, it still stands as an extraordinary tale of hardship, persistence, and discovery – as well as of bad decisions.

Robert Burke, later joined by William Wills, were the leaders of what was meant to be a grand exploration of the unknown interior of the Australian continent. Backed by the prestigious Royal Society of Victoria, the Expedition was to be the pride of the fledgling colony. However, they met with setbacks from the very start: from broken wagons to resignations, bad debts, rat plagues, missing camels, monsoons, endless deserts, and eventually, starvation. Even in the face of all of this, Burke led a small advance party to within a few kilometres of the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

These men understood very little of the lands they walked through, and their attitudes to the places, people and wildlife they encountered ranged from fascination to indifference to outright hostility. Their lack of understanding was to cost them dearly, as they succumbed to malnutrition, exhaustion and disease. Only one of the four who crossed the continent ever returned to Melbourne. The support team also saw fatalities, as their journey north following Burke came at the very height of the summer.

What went wrong? This is an easy question, but there is no simple answer. Many have claimed that the Expedition was beset by poor decision making, poor planning, and bad luck from the very earliest planning stages.

## Themes explored in this resource

There are several themes that can be identified when studying the Burke and Wills expedition. These themes will emerge naturally during the lessons, but it is worth teasing them out individually, especially if the lessons are being used as an integrated unit.

### Discovery

The Victorian Exploring Expedition was essentially concerned with discovering the potential of the central reaches of Australia for exploitation by the European population. Although few still held hope for an inland sea, many felt that usable grazing land was certain to be available. There was the possibility of an overland telegraph route that would link Australia more closely to the Empire and the rest of world. The advancement of scientific knowledge was explicitly stated as an aim of the expedition, although this became clouded by other intentions and by the course of events. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the eyes of the Expedition leader Burke, was the glory of being the first to cross the continent. Burke seemed determined to view his expedition as a race, an approach for which he paid dearly.

### Decision-making and leadership

Decision-making and leadership are two related themes at the core of any real understanding of the Expedition. Widely divergent goals and motivations of team members and leaders fed internal conflicts. Poor decision making and questionable leadership from many individuals led to several deaths, including those of Burke and Wills themselves. Did Burke directly contravene his orders, and if so, why? Why did the Royal Society choose Burke as leader in the first place?

### Science

Although the Expedition was explicitly framed as a scientific one, it appears that Burke was never really interested in scientific discovery. He was openly hostile to the Expedition's naturalist, Ludwig Becker, and ordered the abandonment of scientific equipment at every opportunity. Nevertheless, the Expedition's scientific officers achieved an amazing amount under very stressful conditions. Wills' systematic and methodical recordings of weather, position and terrain give us one of the first European accounts of this landscape. Ludwig Becker's sketches and paintings stand not just as scientific records, but as works of art in their own right.

### The Australian landscape

Few Europeans at the time fully appreciated many of the unique aspects of the Australian continent. They had little sense of the range of climates and environments in the outback, or of the magnitude and timescales of the environmental changes they would encounter. Their poor preparation contributed to the tragic outcomes of the Expedition.

### Indigenous peoples

The Indigenous peoples of Australia had lived in this harsh landscape for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans less than a century before the time of the Expedition, and they understood the environment. The explorers on the Expedition, however, were not used to the arid conditions, and did not have enough knowledge to survive on bush tucker. The Yandruwandha people eventually saved the life of John King after the deaths of Burke and Wills. Surviving records of interactions between members of the Expedition and the Indigenous people they encountered illuminate the differences between the cultures and attitudes of each group.

## A narrative of the Expedition

The idea of the Victorian Exploring Expedition was born in the 1850s. The Colony of Victoria had recently been declared separate from the Colony of New South Wales, and Melbourne, founded in 1835, was one of the fastest growing cities in the world, thanks to the gold rush. Many in the newly-rich colony felt the need to make a mark. The Philosophical Society of Victoria, soon to be incorporated as the Royal Society of Victoria, launched plans for an exploring expedition to fill some of the 'ghastly blank' of European knowledge of the interior of the continent.

Although initially proposed as a scientific expedition, the idea soon captured the public imagination and became entangled with a range of political goals and personal ambitions. Some saw the Expedition as a chance to find new grazing land, others as a chance for personal and colonial glory, still others as a potential route for a telegraph link to the wider world. Colonial rivalry became a driving force, as South Australia continued to press inland, led by experienced explorers such as John Macdougall Stuart and Peter Warburton. A public subscription campaign and several private benefactors were joined by a colonial government grant to make this the best-funded expedition yet mounted.

A large part of these funds went to the procurement of camels from British India. George Landells was given the task of importing 24 of the animals and skilled cameleers to care for them. This expedition had the first large-scale use of camels in the Australian outback.

With funds secured, and equipping underway, personnel were the next priority. Peter Warburton was initially proposed as a potential leader for the Victorian expedition, but was rejected, at least partly on the basis of his South Australian origin. An open advertisement was placed in the newspapers, and after several months of debate, the Exploration Committee settled on Robert O'Hara Burke, an Irish-born police officer working in Castlemaine. Burke was a charming, upper-class military veteran, fluent in five European languages, with a reputation for eccentric behaviour and a reckless streak. He had no scientific background, had never been beyond the settled parts of the country, and had something of a reputation locally for frequently getting lost. Landells, the camel importer, was appointed second-in-command. Other officers were Hermann Beckler, medical officer and botanist; Ludwig Becker, artist and naturalist; and William John Wills, surveyor. Beckler was a young doctor with a passion for botanical collecting. Becker was 52, a member of the Royal Society of Victoria, a gifted artist, and a compulsive collector. Wills was a quiet young man with a strong scientific background and some experience in the outback. There were several other general hands on the Expedition, and the team was rounded out with four 'sepoys' brought from India to care for the camels.

The route was finalised surprisingly close to the departure date. After some debate, it was decided that the Expedition would leave Melbourne and proceed to Cooper's Creek in South Australia before striking out into unknown country, with the goal being to reach the coast at the Gulf of Carpentaria. During final preparations, word came from Adelaide that Stuart was again setting out to attempt a crossing of the continent. The media immediately began to speak of a race between Burke and Stuart.

On 20 August 1860, the Victorian Exploring Expedition left Royal Park with great fanfare. It consisted of 19 men, 24 camels and 26 horses, six wagons, and 20 tonnes of equipment. Even this first day was one of high drama, with thousands of spectators, escaped camels, an assistant sacked for drunkenness, and a wagon bogged even before leaving the park. They took the better part of three weeks to reach Swan Hill, struggling with torrential rain and weighed down by masses of luggage. Tensions were already appearing between members of the team, and several had resigned or been dismissed. At Menindee on the Darling River, Landells and Beckler quit the Expedition, complaining of Burke's behaviour. Wills was made second-in-command. Burke decided to split the party at this point, and continue to the Cooper with a much smaller group, leaving the majority of the equipment to follow later with the relief party, under the command of a newly-appointed local man, William Wright.

It became clear that Burke saw the Expedition as something of a race. He had made no secret of his contempt for the scientific officers, in particular Becker. He used this splitting of the party as a chance to jettison all of the scientific equipment and personnel, with the exception of Wills, in his vital role as

surveyor. Burke hurried on to Cooper's Creek, leaving Wright in Menindee to await confirmation of his appointment and procure more supplies from Melbourne. At the Cooper, Burke split the party again. He left William Brahe and three other men to establish a depot, and took with him only Wills and two others: John King, a veteran of the army in India, experienced with camels, and Charley Gray, a bushman hired in Swan Hill.

The four men set out from Cooper's Creek with six camels and Burke's favourite horse on 16 December 1860. Burke had left Brahe instructions to wait for three months at the Creek before assuming they would not return. Brahe settled in, building a stockade and maintaining largely cordial relations with the Yandruwandha, the local Indigenous people.

Meanwhile, Wright and the relief party were stranded in Menindee, hampered by lack of supplies and awaiting confirmation of orders from Melbourne. They ended up setting out in late January, heading into extreme conditions unlike those encountered by Burke months earlier. Waterholes had dried up, rat plagues attacked supplies, and a series of hostile encounters with Indigenous tribes led to armed confrontations. Three men died of illness and malnutrition on the relief expedition, including Ludwig Becker, who had continued collecting and painting until his strength failed.

Burke and his small group pushed north. After a long, arduous trek, they entered the Gulf country. They did not in fact reach the coast, finding their way blocked by mangrove swamps in the last few kilometres. The men and animals were all exhausted, having taken nearly two months and used two thirds of their supplies on the way, and now faced with the task of returning to the Cooper. The return trek saw the deaths of most of the camels, Burke's horse, and Charley Gray. Suffering terribly from malnutrition, he had stolen some flour, for which Burke had given him a 'thrashing'. He died some days later.

Brahe stayed four months on the Cooper. With his men becoming ill and relations with the Yandruwandha people deteriorating, he finally left on 21 April 1861, burying a small cache of supplies near a tree into which he had cut the word 'DIG'. In a colossal irony Burke, Wills and King staggered into the depot later that same day, finding the ashes of the fire still warm. The men were too weak to take off after the party, and stayed a few days gathering their strength before deciding to follow the Cooper downstream and then strike overland to the police outpost at Mount Disappointment. Days after they left, Brahe returned with Wright, whom he had encountered en route. The men did not notice any disturbance in the cache, and soon left again, unaware that the survivors were at the time less than 50 kilometres downstream.

Burke, Wills and King struggled down the Cooper. They were still weak, and their supplies were gone. They depended on the Yandruwandha to survive, accepting fish, birds, and cakes made of what they found to be the fern nardoo. Failing to understand what the Yandruwandha saw as the reciprocal nature of their relationship, Burke found them intrusive. He became enraged and fired his pistol over the heads of members of the tribe. This ended the aid from these people. The three men resorted to gathering their own nardoo, but they had not learnt the secrets of preparing the flour. Unknown to them, the nardoo was leaching nutrients from their bodies, and they continued to weaken. Wills finally insisted that Burke and King leave him behind, and he died alone at the end of June. Burke died on or around the same day only a few kilometres upstream, leaving King alone. King turned again to the Yandruwandha, who took him in. He was found by the relief expedition sent from Melbourne in September.

When news of the deaths of Burke and Wills reached Melbourne in November, it caused an unprecedented outcry. A major government inquiry was launched, laying most of the blame on Wright, but also criticising the actions of Brahe and of Burke himself. An expedition returned the remains of Burke and Wills to Melbourne, where, after lying in state for several weeks and being seen by tens of thousands of visitors, they were given Victoria's first ever state funeral. Memorabilia was immensely popular, and included everything from souvenir lithographs and prints to songs and even plays.

John Stuart, of the South Australian expedition, reached the north coast and returned successfully without any loss of life at the end of 1862. His official reception in Adelaide was the same day as the funeral of Burke and Wills in Melbourne.