

# I'M AN INCOMPETENT EXPLORER, GET ME OUT OF HERE!

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*In which courage and ineptitude join forces  
to tell a story of heroism and tragedy,  
and two unlucky men discover that  
camels are no substitute for commonsense  
when you're in the desert*

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'BURKE,' CROAKED WILLIAM JOHN Wills, his dry cracked throat barely able to get the words out.

'Yes, Wills?' Robert O'Hara Burke, weak and exhausted himself, clutched his friend's hand, eager to hear what he had to say at this time of utmost crisis.

'Come closer, Burke.'

'I don't want to, Wills. You don't smell very good.'

'Burke ... I want you to leave me behind.'

'Okay.' Burke nodded and tried to stand, but Wills kept holding on to his hand.

'Burke, I don't want you to feel bad. It's alright. For your own sake, go on without me.'

'Yes, I will,' Burke replied, tugging feebly to break the grip.

'No arguments, Burke!' Wills insisted. 'I don't want to hear your noble objections. I know you don't want to leave me, but you must.'

‘Yep, you’re right. Bye.’

Wills’s eyes filled with tears. ‘You are too good to me, old friend. If you cannot bear to tear yourself away, I suppose I cannot make you go.’

Burke didn’t hear him say that: he’d already left.

Nobody could have foreseen this catastrophic conclusion ten months ago when the Burke and Wills expedition set out from Melbourne. Or to put it another way, pretty much anyone could have foreseen it, but they were all very positive people who didn’t like to dwell on the gloomy side of exploration.

The object of the expedition was to travel from Melbourne north all the way to the Gulf of Carpentaria, crossing the entire continent and finding out what the hell was in the big scary middle bit of Australia. Whether it was an inland sea, a huge glittering city or a string of violently erupting volcanoes, one thing was for sure: it wasn’t any of those things. But still, it seemed important at the time to find out more about it, because the maps looked untidy with blank spaces all over the place. Another motivation was Victoria’s desire to be the first colony to explore the interior, and show those snobbish New South Welsh just who had the most liveable colony. In New South Wales they found this kind of cute.

Planning for the expedition fell to the Exploration Committee of the Royal Society of Victoria. Calling for offers of interest for the position of expedition leader, the committee received numerous applications from experienced explorers, but found their experience and qualifications show-offy and gauche.<sup>62</sup> ‘Wouldn’t it be better,’ said the committee, ‘if we chose someone who was less boastful and arrogant about his exploring abilities, because he had none?’ And with

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62 An approach that survives today in the preselection process of the Australian Labor Party.

this principle of the humble incompetent in mind, they selected Robert O'Hara Burke.

It wasn't that Burke was a man of no talents: it was just that none of his talents involved exploring. Born in Ireland, he had served in the Austrian Army, the Irish Constabulary and the colonial police force, but in his heart he had always harboured a secret desire to one day get a job doing something he had no idea how to do. The committee thought him eminently suitable to lead the inland exploration, not being deterred even when Burke referred to the expedition's camels as 'the ugliest dogs I have ever seen.' (These camels, incidentally, had been purchased from India and were stabled at Parliament House in Melbourne before the expedition set out. To this day, Victoria has maintained the tradition of keeping camels in Parliament, occasionally even elevating them to premier.)

George Landells was made second-in-command of the expedition in recognition of the fact that he was the man who'd brought the camels, and in the position of third-in-command, astronomer and surveyor, was placed William John Wills, a doctor's son from Devon with a thirst for knowledge and an insatiable desire to be subordinated to those less qualified than himself.

On 20 August 1860, the Victorian Exploring Expedition (VEE) set off, with 19 men, 23 horses, six wagons, 26 camels and an all-embracing atmosphere of doom. They left Royal Park around 4pm, and several minutes later one of the wagons broke down. By midnight they had reached Essendon, where two more wagons broke down. Based on his prior experience of exploration, Burke considered that everything was going pretty well.

As they kept slogging their way north through heavy rains, poor roads and terrain completely unsuitable for camels, God became

frustrated at the party's failure to realise that He really, really didn't want the expedition to happen. 'What do I have to do,' the Supreme Being asked in exasperation, 'drop some freaking locusts on them?' He refrained from doing so, although most historians are agreed that a plague of locusts would probably have improved the trip: it certainly couldn't have made it any worse, and maybe they could have asked the locusts for directions.

The expedition's progress wasn't made any speedier by Burke's firm commitment to a hyperactive Human Resources Department. Espousing the principle that workers are more efficient when under constant threat of unemployment, he kept up a regular schedule of firing and hiring. This ensured that Burke rarely became bored with any of his colleagues' company, but whether it made for a more harmonious group experience is up for debate.

Burke was also worried about the expense of the hired wagons, so he offset this cost by sacking more men, which resulted in one of them challenging him to a fight. Things were certainly going swimmingly. Those men whom he hadn't fired yet were ordered to restrict themselves to only 30 pounds of luggage each and told they would have to walk the whole way so the animals could be saved for carrying stores. The men were unhappy, claiming that none of this was in the brochure. Upon discovering that their deposits were non-refundable, they stayed on, but there was a definite feeling that at any moment Burke might be made into the new Bligh.

It wasn't that Burke didn't have the best interests of the expedition at heart – he just didn't have much idea what the best interests of the expedition were. Like a marathon runner who has misguidedly started the race wearing a suit of armour, he was frantically trying to rid the VEE of excess weight as he went along. At Balranald he dumped the

sugar and the lime juice, leaving the entire expedition without a reliable source of cordial for the rest of the trip. At Bilbarka he ordered the disposal of the 60 gallons of rum that the party had brought along. This not only lightened the load, but also prevented the men from getting drunk on duty – which was probably for the best, all in all.

This move, however, did not please Burke's vice-captain, Landells, who had brought the rum along not for recreational use, but for the camels: he claimed it was necessary to keep them from contracting scurvy. Burke was unsure of how to respond to this claim. Should he slap Landells' face? Have him committed to an institution? In the end he didn't need to make a decision: Landells resigned, declaring that he could not be held responsible for the welfare of any expedition reckless enough to deny its camels regular shots of rum. It is from this famous incident that we get the traditional Australian expression 'as dumb as George Frigging Landells'.

Wills was promoted to second-in-command, and the VEE found itself in Menindee in New South Wales on 12 October. It had taken them 53 days to get there from Melbourne, a trip the mail coach could do in a week or so. But nobody ever said crossing a continent from north to south would be easy or fast or advisable or done by competent professionals.

Burke was panicking. The VEE's pace while travelling during the day was almost the same as their pace while sleeping at night. The Royal Society was running out of money, and the men didn't know if they were going to be paid. The explorer John Stuart had set out from Adelaide to claim a prize offered by the South Australian government to the first man to cross from the south coast to the north coast, west of the 143rd meridian, and Burke was terrified of being beaten to the punch. Everything was going wrong, and yet with the

natural daring and lack of intelligence that had brought him this far, he pressed on.

On 11 November, Burke and Wills reached Cooper's Creek, the outer limit of European exploration to that point. They made camp there, then made camp again a short distance away, after a plague of rats arrived at the first camp. This was further proof of God's deep hatred of everyone involved with the expedition, but again Burke and Wills ignored the obvious signs that they should go the hell back.

This was an important juncture in the journey. Having successfully reached Cooper's Creek, the VEE could camp until autumn, avoiding the heat of the brutal Queensland summer, which would have made travel exceedingly difficult. This was a reasonable and obvious course of action that any half-sensible explorer would take in the circumstances, so it was hardly surprising when Burke decided to set off north again on 16 December, right in the middle of summer. By this time God had stopped worrying, realising that nothing he could do to the expedition would be as destructive as what Burke was doing to it.

Burke, Wills, John King and Charles Gray started the last leg to the Gulf of Carpentaria, while the rest of the VEE stayed at Cooper's Creek. 'Wait for us three months, then head home,' said Burke, before striding into the unknown.

'Actually, make that four,' said Wills, quietly so Burke wouldn't hear him: he knew that Burke was a proud and yet pathetically ignorant man.

And so, the intrepid four staggered northward, guided by Wills's survivalist skills and Burke's indomitable pigheadedness, battling the merciless heat. The temperature in the region could reach up to 50°C in the shade – more when you take into account the impractical underpants people wore in the 1860s – and, if anything, their travels

were conclusive proof of the fact that people living in Australia was a terrible idea in the first place.

Yet somehow the expedition endured. They trekked through desert, mountains and scrubland, much to the chagrin of the camels, who were recorded in Burke's journal as 'bleeding, sweating and groaning' as they pushed through the Selwyn Ranges: though this may have been seen as an improvement on the average camel's normal practice of spitting, vomiting and biting people.

When you're walking through north Queensland, the January sun beating down upon your backs, the arrival of cool, refreshing rain must come as a blessed relief, although the continuation of cool refreshing rain quickly starts to get right on your wick, as Burke and Wills discovered when the Gulf's wet season arrived and they found themselves knee-deep in water watching their camels sink into the mud in much the same fashion as the faithful horse Artax in beloved fantasy film *The Neverending Story*: a movie that has many similarities with the Burke and Wills saga, including the fact that it's about a mission undertaken by a dangerously unqualified individual, as well as its extremely disappointing ending.

Say what you like about Burke and Wills, but one thing you can't deny is that they were stupid to ever even try this dumb expedition. But another thing you can't deny is that they had guts. After being fried in the desert and then nearly drowned in the floods over the course of a few months, they finally reached their destination. Sort of.

On 9 February,<sup>63</sup> they came up just short of the actual coast. They recorded that they could taste the salt water of the sea, which seems like a pretty inadvisable thing to do, but could not make it to the open ocean due to the mangrove swamps in their way. You'd think they

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63 My birthday, by the way, so there are two reasons to celebrate the date.

could've tried a bit harder though, to be honest. I mean they were only swamps, how hard could it be? The ocean was right over there, and they turned back because things got a bit swampy. Yes, Burke and Wills certainly were born quitters.

Having reached the northern shore (but not really [but they were all like 'let's not and say we did' about it {but they got closer than anyone else, and it's more than you ever did}]), the men turned back. From Cooper's Creek to the Gulf had taken them two months, and they had only 27 days' worth of food left. 'I told you we shouldn't be having seconds,' Wills berated Burke.

Of course, when I say they had 27 days' worth of food left, I'm not counting the camels and horses, which provided a series of delicious and nutritious meals for the four men. They ate three camels in all, which is a hell of a lot of camel jerky.

They also ate Burke's favourite horse, Billy, causing Burke to suffer a haunting flashback to the day he first got his steed. 'Don't give him a name,' his mum said. 'You'll just get attached, and then it'll be all the more heart-rending when you have to eat him.' How he wished he'd heeded his mother's advice! Once again, the Burke and Wills expedition was infused by the spirit of Artax, as Burke wept over Billy's lifeless body in between taking bites out of it.

Still, the four men struggled on towards Cooper's Creek, where their comrades awaited, and despite the camel sandwiches, food ran short again. If they'd ever seen *I'm A Celebrity ...* they would've known you can make simple but nutritious meals out of spiders, worms and buffalo testicles, but it wasn't on air yet, and they foolishly restricted themselves to things that vaguely resembled food. Charles Gray killed a python, which was a bit of a treat, but as the Bible says, man cannot live on snake alone, especially when man has dysentery, which Burke



and Gray got shortly after eating the python. Did the snake-based diet contribute to the illness? It's hard to say. But not that hard.

During the dysentery period, which was naturally a time of great tension and copious mopping among the group, Wills caught Gray stealing flour. Had he been stealing from them all along? We may never know, although certainly Gray was the oldest member of the party, and old people are notoriously untrustworthy. To be fair, though, he was also starving and dying of dysentery, and maybe they could've cut him some slack.

Slack-cutting, though, was no more in Burke's vocabulary than were intelligent planning or realistic goals. He subjected Gray to 'explorer's justice', i.e. he beat the living crap out of him. Burke believed that Gray was not only a thief, but also a malingerer. He thought he was faking the whole dysentery thing, and also possibly the starvation thing and the 'being old' thing, and aimed to punish him thoroughly.

Two weeks later, Gray was unable to walk. 'Oh, give the man an Oscar,' said Burke, applauding sarcastically. A week after that, the others woke up one morning to find Gray dead in his swag. 'Nice one, Gary Oldman,' sneered Burke, 'amazing performance.' For the rest of the day, King and Wills dug Gray's grave, while Burke continued to clap and make snide remarks about Stanislavsky.

Five days after Gray's death, Burke, Wills and King staggered back into the camp at Cooper's Creek, grateful and relieved to be reunited with their companions.

The camp was deserted.

'Those guys,' said Burke, eyes welling with joyous tears. 'Imagine throwing a surprise party for us! What great friends I've made on this trip. I hope we all keep in touch.'

'I think they're gone,' said the ever-pragmatic Wills.

‘No, no,’ Burke insisted, ‘any minute now they’ll jump out with a cake. Just wait.’

‘I don’t –’

‘*JUST WAIT!*’ Burke screamed.

So they waited through the night, for the shout of ‘*Surprise!*’, but it did not come. Slowly, two indisputable facts began to dawn on Robert O’Hara Burke:

1. It wasn’t his birthday.
2. The other members of the VEE had left Cooper’s Creek and weren’t coming back.

In fact, in probably the most heartbreaking Australian historical tragedy of the pre-Daryl Somers era, the others had left Cooper’s only a few hours before, on the morning of 21 April, having waited a full 18 weeks for their colleagues’ return. Burke, Wills and King had entered camp that evening. After the horrific journey south, they and their two remaining camels had no chance of catching up with them.

Upon a tree at Cooper’s Creek was carved the word ‘DIG’. Obeying this, they found a box of provisions and a note from William Brahe, who had been charged with command of the Cooper’s Creek Depot:

*Dear Burke and Wills,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. We decided to go home, as we were getting bored and we are sick of cleaning up camel vomit. See you in Melbourne – it’s your round!*

*Yours,*

*William Brahe*

The tree under which the provisions were found is known today as the ‘Dig Tree’ and is one of Australia’s more famous trees, along with the tree Blinky Bill lives in, and the one who did the stunts for the Ents in *Lord of the Rings*. Thousands of enthusiasts travel to Cooper’s Creek each year to look at the tree and say, ‘Huh. It’s a tree.’

After a couple of days’ rest and recuperation, they set out again. Wills and King wanted to go back the way they had come, but after all he’d been through, Burke saw no reason to start being good at his job now. He decided instead to head for the cattle station at Mount Hopeless, a mountain that surprisingly had been named before the Burke and Wills expedition set out. ‘It’ll be more poetic,’ he told the others.

While Burke, Wills and King headed towards Mount Hopeless, Brahe met up with another member of the original VEE, William Wright, travelling north from Menindee to bring supplies to Cooper’s Creek. Together they returned to the camp to see if Burke and Wills had returned. ‘No sign of them,’ said Brahe. ‘Back we go.’

‘Hmm,’ said Wright. ‘Why don’t we see if those provisions you left here have been taken? Maybe they did make it back here, dug up the provisions, decided to move on, wrote a letter explaining what they were doing and buried it in the same spot for anyone who came back here to find.’

‘Nah,’ Brahe replied. ‘That doesn’t sound much like something that’d happen in real life. Taking five minutes to dig under a tree would be a total waste of our time.’

‘You’re probably right,’ nodded Wright. ‘Let’s go.’

And so they did.

Which is how Burke, Wills and King found themselves stranded, weak and starving, beyond help, on the banks of Cooper’s Creek, far

from Mount Hopeless and near to death. The nights were freezing. The only food was what the local Aboriginal people were willing to give them: mostly fish or flatbread made from the seeds of the nardoo plant.<sup>64</sup> At Breerily Waterhole, all seemed lost.

‘This is Brahe’s fault,’ raged Burke. ‘He could’ve left us some of his camels or a bike or something.’

‘I’m sure he did what he could,’ said Wills wearily.

‘He always was a selfish bastard,’ Burke muttered. He sighed. ‘This wind goes right through me. If only we still had that blanket.’

‘The one you burnt.’

‘I did not!’ Burke protested. ‘It happened to *get* burnt, after an unfortunate accident while I was cooking dinner.’

‘Everything else got burnt too,’ Wills noted.

‘The fish didn’t. It was done beautifully.’ He sighed again. ‘I wish we had some of it now. I wonder why the natives ran away like that.’

‘Maybe it was because you shot at them.’<sup>65</sup>

‘Maybe, maybe.’ Burke nodded philosophically. ‘The Aboriginal psyche is such a mystery. Who knows what causes him to flee thus?’

‘I bet getting shot at would do it, though.’

‘Let’s not play the blame game, Wills.’

‘Sorry, Burke.’

And that’s where this chapter came in. Wills, suffering from malnutrition, exposure and Burke’s company, asked to be left at Breerily while Burke and King made a last-ditch effort to find the Yandruwandha tribe who had been so helpful previously until Burke’s playful gunplay caused them to keep their distance. Wills’s last testament was his journal, in which he wrote on 20 June that the

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64 A four-leafed clover created by George Lucas.

65 He did, too. He really was a tool.

nardoo was causing ‘enormous stools’: words that are as true today as when they were written.

As for Burke and King, they continued upstream for two days before Burke became too weak to continue and asked King to leave him unburied with his pistol in his hand, in case he became a zombie and had to fight off zombie hunters. Burke died at eight in the morning. King stayed with his body for two days before returning to Breerily, where he found that Wills had also expired.

King went on to find some of the Yandruwandha, who gave him food and shelter. On 15 September 1861, he was found by the Victorian Relief Expedition, one of several search parties sent out to find Burke and Wills, and returned to Melbourne.

What was the legacy of Burke and Wills? They represent perhaps the most romantic episode in the history of Australian exploration, if by ‘romantic’ you mean ‘depressing’. Modern readers can only marvel at the sheer courage, resilience and refusal to accept reality of these noble men. Burke and Wills proved once and for all, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that with enough will and determination, a man *can* die alone in the desert, and that is no small thing.

It’s worth noting that the expedition did, in fact, achieve its goal of crossing the continent from south to north, covering more than 3000 kilometres before running afoul of the iron-clad law of adventurers: once you’ve got somewhere, you’ve got to go back. The exploits of Burke and Wills provided many valuable insights into the nature of this land, mostly revolving around how awful it is. They also supplied future explorers with crucial data regarding how to go about further explorations. But, despite this, people kept doing it for some reason.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. What is better for carrying supplies on a doomed desert expedition:  
a) camels; b) horses; or c) a tree?
2. Rank the members of the Burke and Wills expedition in order of intelligence. Then rank them in order of enormous stools.