

Podcast 131 – Explorers of Australia – Burke and Wills

Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia, with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 131 – Explorers of Australia – Burke and Wills

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(This podcast is 20 minutes and 8 seconds long.)

Hi,

When Europeans first arrived in Australia in 1788, they found a land very different to that in Europe, much of it harsh, dry and rugged. In the 1800s, one of the early challenges was to explore the land and find suitable areas where people could settle. In this podcast, I would like to tell you a little about one of the most famous expeditions which occurred in 1860/61. It is famous not only because it was successful, but also because it ended in tragedy. The expedition was led by two men – Robert Burke and William Wills. Most Australians know it as the Burke and Wills expedition.

Australia's gold rushes had started around 1850. As a result, by 1860, Victoria had become the richest colony in Australia. While some of Australia had been explored, there were still large regions in Australia's centre where Europeans had never been. There were wealthy citizens in Melbourne who wanted to fund a major expedition through the centre of Australia to find a way right across Australia from south to north. The Victorian government supported the expedition. Its aims were to find new farming land, to study the land scientifically and to find a route across Australia so that a telegraph line could be built in the future. There would also be great honour

in becoming the first explorers to cross Australia from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria, a distance of around 3250 kilometres.



Rocketfrog at the English-language Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Robert O'Hara Burke was chosen as the leader. While he was a strong-willed Irishman with forceful leadership skills, he had no exploration experience, had no skills in navigation and no skills in surveying. His inexperience for the task turned out to be just one of many difficulties facing the expedition. Burke recruited a team of 18 men, including William John Wills, who later became second in charge. Wills, 26 years old, was appointed the surveyor and navigator for the expedition. Wills had significant experience of the Australian bush and he was highly skilled at his job. All up, the team included 6 Irishmen, 5 Englishmen, 3 Germans and an American. Burke organised an enormous amount of provisions, including enough food for 2 years of travel. To carry this, they took 26 camels, 23 horses and 6 wagons. The camels were looked after by 3 Afghans and an Indian. The size of this expedition was extraordinary. For example, they brought 3220 kilos of flour, 180 kilos of bacon, 45 litres of vinegar, plus much, much more. They carried spares for just about everything. For example, they carried 500 saddle straps as spares. All the provisions and equipment amounted to around 20 tonnes. Carrying so much turned out to be a big mistake, as it slowed them down unnecessarily.

The expedition set out on the 20th of August 1860 from the centre of Melbourne. Around 15,000 Melburnians were there to see them off. The plan was to establish 2 depots along the way, where they could rest and store provisions until they were needed. The first depot was to be at Menindee, the last outpost of European settlement in New South Wales. It was about 750 kilometres north from Melbourne. They reached there on the 12th of October, around 2 months later, but they were

making very slow progress. Already, Burke had realized that much of the provisions and equipment they were carrying were not really needed. He sold some at a town called Swan Hill and, not long after, left more behind in order to reduce the weight the expedition was carrying.

There was also another factor driving Burke to change his plans. Prior to leaving, it was known that another explorer, John McDouell Stuart, was also planning to try to reach the Gulf of Carpentaria, but rather from Adelaide. Burke had a real fear that he would not be the first to get there. This caused him to make some hasty decisions and to choose speed over all other considerations.

He decided to leave most of his supplies at Menindee, so that he could move more quickly to a place called Coopers Creek several hundred kilometres north, where he would establish another depot. A local Menindee man named William Wright was put in charge of these supplies at Menindee. Burke asked Wright to bring these supplies on to Coopers Creek. As it turned out, Wright waited 3 months before he set off from Menindee to bring the supplies. The reasons why he delayed are not really known.

Meanwhile, Burke and the remaining team arrived at Coopers Creek in mid-November and set up their camp. Summer was arriving and the temperatures were rising steadily. It was assumed that Burke would wait there until the cooler weather began in March. However, once again Burke's desire for speed affected his decision making. In mid-December, in the summer heat, he decided to go as fast as he could for the Gulf. He once again split his team up, leaving 4 members at the Coopers Creek depot along with most of the supplies. William Brahe was put in charge of this group. Burke instructed him to wait there for 3 months until his return from the Gulf. Burke, Wills and team members John King and Charles Gray then set off for the Gulf with 6 camels, one horse and sufficient food for 3 months.

It's important to remember that this part of Australia is very rugged, harsh and often rocky. Travelling in the heat was a real challenge, with temperatures often reaching 50 deg C and little shade. After 59 days of travel across this difficult landscape, Burke and his team finally arrived at the Gulf of Carpentaria on the 9th February 1861. They were unable to see the ocean, as the coastline was covered by mangrove swamps which were almost impassable, but they knew they were close to the sea. Burke was satisfied that he had achieved his goal. With supplies for only 27 days left, they commenced the journey back to Coopers Creek approximately 1500 km away, where they believed William Brahe and his team were waiting for them with the supplies.

The journey back to Coopers Creek was torturous. Their animals got weaker and their food was running out. They were forced to shoot and eat 3 of their camels, their only horse and leave more supplies behind. Despite these setbacks, they continued, covering many kilometres per day.

Occasionally, they came across groups of Aborigines who were living their traditional lifestyle in the outback, as the Aborigines have done for many, many thousands of years in Australia. Burke's team found them to be almost always peaceful. On occasions, they were able to obtain food from them. In contrast to Burke and his team, the Aborigines were quite at home in the harsh outback wilderness and had adapted to the harsh environment.

The difficult journey made the four men grow weaker and weaker. After 64 days of hard going, on the 17th of April, Charles Gray died from malnutrition, exhaustion and sickness. They stopped for a day to dig a shallow grave and bury him and then continued on their journey. By now they were very close to Coopers Creek but were almost totally exhausted.

Meanwhile, William Brahe waiting at Coopers Creek had waited 4

months, a month longer than Burke had requested. He decided that Burke and his team must have perished in the outback. On the 21st of April, in the morning, he and his team left to return to Menindee, taking the remaining supplies with them. Before they left, they buried a month's worth of supplies at the base of a large tree, along with a note saying when they had left and that they were returning to Menindee. They carved a message on the tree. The sign read 'Dig', with perhaps some additional words, although the exact wording is unknown.

Just 9 hours later that same day, on the 21st of April 1861, Burke, Wills and King staggered into the Coopers Creek depot – exhausted, sick and suffering terribly from malnutrition. Their remaining camels were wasted and hardly fit for travel. They saw the 'Dig' message and they dug up the food and read the note.



Painting by John Longstaff – Arrival of Burke, Wills and King

at Coopers Creek (Dig Tree), 1861

By just 9 hours they had missed Brahe and the supplies.

This was a huge disappointment and they felt great despair. Burke felt certain that they could not catch up with Brahe, given their extremely exhausted and starving condition. Instead they rested up as best they could, using the provisions which had been left for them. Burke then decided to travel in a south westerly direction across the desert, in order to reach a farming property about 250 kilometres away in the direction of Adelaide. They set out on the 23rd of April, but did not finish this journey. Despite being given some food by a group of local aborigines, both Wills and Burke died of malnutrition and exhaustion at the end of June, 1861. Only King survived and he was also in a bad way. He left their bodies where they died. Luckily for him, the local aborigines found him and looked after him for about 2 months until a rescue party arrived from Melbourne in September 1861.

William Wills had kept detailed notes and a diary of their journey. These documents were saved, giving us a clear record of what had happened on most days of the expedition. Most of these notes remain and are held in the State Library of Victoria and the National Library of Australia.

<http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/index.php>

Several rescue expeditions set out to find Burke and Wills after their failure to return, and these expeditions discovered new farming lands. So, in a sense, as well as achieving the first crossing from south to north, Burke and Wills also caused the opening up of new areas of Australia for new settlers.

The bodies of Burke and Wills were subsequently returned to Melbourne and given a public burial in 1863, with 40,000

Melburnians lining the streets as the coffins passed by.

This exploration story has captured the imagination of many Australians over the years. The tree with the 'dig' message became famously known by Australians as 'the dig tree'. For me, this tragic story demonstrates that, in order to do a difficult and complicated job, you need the required skills, knowledge and experience – not only in the team, but also in the leader. It also demonstrates how amazingly effective the traditional lifestyle of the Aborigines was back then. They had no problem living and surviving in the harsh outback environment, whereas the unprepared Europeans were unable to survive.

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 131 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

[Start quiz](#)

[Vocabulary](#)

- Play Aborigines = first people who lived in Australia prior to Europeans arriving
- Play achieved = reached
- Play adapted = when you have changed so that you can survive
- Play Afghans = people who come from Afghanistan
- Play aims = what you want to do, the goals
- Play appointed = when you are selected to do a job
- Play assumed = when you think you know something, but have not been told
- Play burial = the act of burying something or someone in the ground
- Play bury = to put something in a hole in the ground and cover it with earth
- Play captured = (here) to hold your attention, to make you look at something
- Play challenges = things which are very hard or difficult to do
- Play citizens = the people who live in a country
- Play coffins = the box in which you put a dead person, so that you can bury them in the ground
- Play colony = an area that is controlled by a foreign country (in this case, Great Britain)
- Play complicated = difficult to do or understand
- Play considerations = all the things you must think of when making a decision
- Play delayed = to do something later rather than sooner

- Play demonstrates = shows
- Play depots = a place where you stop for a while, a place where you store things
- Play despair = when you are very, very sad
- Play diary = a written record of what happened to you every day
- Play disappointment = when you are very unhappy that something did not happen
- Play enormous = very, very large
- Play equipment = the things you need to do a job. For example tools, machines etc
- Play establish = to make, to build
- Play exhaustion = when you are very, very tired from walking or running too far
- Play expeditions = a journey to an unknown place in order to find new knowledge
- Play exploration = the act of looking for new things in unknown places
- Play explore = to look for and find new things
- Play extraordinary = unusual, not normal
- Play extremely = very
- Play factor = something you think about when making a decision
- Play forceful = strong, can get others to do what you want
- Play fund = to pay for

- Play goal = aim
- Play gold rushes = when gold is found on the ground and people rush to dig it up
- Play grave = a hole in the ground where you bury a dead person
- Play harsh = uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, rough
- Play hasty = when something is done quickly, usually without thinking about it
- Play honour = when you receive great respect, when people like what you do
- Play imagination = when you think about something in your head
- Play impassable = you cannot pass through something
- Play Indian = people who come from India
- Play malnutrition = when you get too little food
- Play mangrove swamps = special trees which grow in muddy salty water near the ocean
- Play Melburnians = people who live in Melbourne, Victoria
- Play navigation = the process of finding your way in unknown places
- Play obtain = to get
- Play occasionally = sometimes
- Play occurred = happened
- Play outpost = a place that further away from the city than anywhere else

- Play perished = died, usually from having not enough food or water or shelter
- Play prior = before
- Play progress = movement from one place towards another
- Play provisions = things you take on a journey such as food, clothing, equipment etc
- Play recruited = to select or chose people to be on your team
- Play reduce = make lighter, make smaller
- Play regions = large areas of land
- Play rescue party = a group who comes to save you from a bad situation
- Play route = path, way
- Play rugged = rocky, hill, difficult to walk over
- Play saddle straps = strips of leather used on a saddle for a horse
- Play scientifically = measuring and recording things exactly, like a scientist would do
- Play second in charge = not the leader, but the next most important person
- Play set out = start
- Play settle = (here) to go somewhere to live
- Play shallow = not very deep
- Play significant = important
- Play spares = something which can replace another part if it

breaks, For example, a spare tyre

- Play split = make two groups from one
- Play staggered = almost unable to walk, almost falling over
- Play starving = when you have little or no food
- Play strong-willed = when you believe your opinion is better than others
- Play subsequently = following, after
- Play sufficient = enough
- Play supplies = provisions
- Play supported = helped
- Play surveying = mapping the land
- Play survived = are still alive after a dangerous event
- Play telegraph line = a wire which can send messages over long distance
- Play torturous = when an event causes suffering and pain
- Play traditional = as things were done in the past
- Play tragedy = an event where very bad things happen
- Play tragic = when bad things happen
- Play wasted = (here) very, very weak

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