

## BEYOND THE BLACK STUMP

F. A. Lackner

To the European mind, the discovery of Australia happened on April 10, 1770, early in the morning, when Captain James Cook sighted land at Cape Everard at the southeastern corner of the continent. Before that a number of Dutchmen, Spaniards and one or two Englishmen had visited parts of the west or north coasts. The Spaniard de Torres had passed through what later became known as Torres Strait on the north coast, and Abel Tasman, a Dutchman, had sighted Van Diemen's Land - later known as Tasmania. He pronounced it uninhabitable because of its wildness and because it was inhabited by a race of wild giants.

William Dampier, an Englishman, sighted the west coast when he was supercargo on a trading ship - a thinly disguised pirate ship - in 1688. He returned the next year to explore further along that coast, and reported it barren and almost devoid of animals.

For a hundred years Europe and England lost interest.

Then, in 1769, an early geophysical year, England joined in a scientific effort to improve the navigational and astronomical efforts of the world by observing the transit of Venus across the sun. England's assignment was to observe it from the island of Tahiti. Captain James Cook was appointed to lead that expedition - but he also had further orders. After making the observations at Tahiti, he was told to explore around the great southern

ocean in an attempt to locate the great southern continent which for centuries had been suspected.

England was of course aware of previous voyages, almost all of which had gone along the west and north coasts. By 1655 the Dutch had reasonably accurate charts of those coasts. As a result the land was known as New Holland, and it kept that name until well after the English settled at the southeast corner.

So when Captain Cook sighted Cape Everard and subsequently sailed along the whole length of the east coast it was really a new discovery. He sailed slowly and carefully, charting as he went, without major difficulties until he hit - literally - the Great Barrier Reef. After taking some months to repair his ship he continued on and finally rounded Cape York at the extreme northeast corner of the continent, took possession of the land at Possession Island, sailed through Torres Strait, and home.

When he reached England with his news, it was an inspiration when the thought occurred to the government that all of the convicts crowding England's prison hulks - and whom the recalcitrant American colonies would no longer accept - could be sent to a land which Cook reported as being habitable, but with no or very few inhabitants. It was also far away. Cook returned to England in 1770, and by 1785 plans were well under way for this great transportation. On January 27, 1788, the First Fleet landed at the site of the present City of Sydney, carrying 160 soldiers with forty-two wives and children and 729 convicts, including women and children.

A more inauspicious beginning for a colony could hardly be imagined. These settlers were the dregs of the English jails, with no skills other than pickpocketing, robbery or forgery. Nor were the soldiers guarding them of a mind to be colonists. The land near the new settlement appeared to be singularly unsuited to farming. The ground was hard and dry and broke the plows. The trees were so dense and hard that they broke the axes. There were no friendly Indians to show them how to plant a bush in each hill of corn. The colony had supplies for only a few months. The colonists were continually on short rations, living for the first several years from one supply ship to the next - and every supply ship brought more convicts and more soldiers to guard them.

Somehow the colony lived on, with more convicts and an increasing number of free settlers coming each year. Since the land near the town was hard to work and unproductive, primary farm operations were moved slightly west.

It was soon discovered that while the interior of the continent might have much to recommend it, there was really no practical way of getting there. Just a short distance to the west of Sydney there was the impenetrable barrier of the Great Dividing Range. This was a singularly apt name for a mountain range with thick forests, steep canyons and rocky precipices. It was not crossed by any except a few hardy souls who had to go through on foot. This, plus the almost universal lack of ambition, prevented expansion inland. The convicts, of course, were not allowed to wander around, the soldiers had to stay to guard them, and the few free settlers were too busy trying to scratch a living.

The soldiers also, or at least the officers, were also well occupied carrying on the lucrative monopoly they had in the liquor business. Wine was thought to be an effective anti-scorbutic, so every ship carried a large supply, which on arrival was sold only to the army officers. It was a highly profitable trade, and soon became the chief occupation of the guards.

At about the turn of the century a few venturesome souls began to go further afield. At the same time there developed a greater curiosity, both in England and in Australia, about the entire continent. A surgeon in the navy who had come out with one of the supply ships decided to stay, and spent much of his time sailing around the harbor, and occasionally ventured out in to the ocean. On one of these trips, in an eight-foot boat, Dr. Bass sailed south along the coast, and rounded Cape Everard. Large swells and heavy weather prevented him from going farther, but the winds and the tide and swells from the southwest convinced him that the land which he knew lay to the south of him - Van Diemen's Land - was not an extension of the Australian continent, but was in fact an island.

At about the same time, Matthew Flinders, a well-known navigator, came out to Australia on the staff of the new governor. He of course met Dr. Bass, and the two of them sailed along the coasts both north and south of Sydney. They were given the use of a somewhat larger boat for their use in a project they had in mind. In 1799 they sailed south from Sydney, through the strait that had been named after Bass, and circumnavigated Van Diemen's Land - soon to become known as Tasmania after the Dutchman Abel Tasman who first sighted it.

Flinders returned to England, secured a small ship and went back to Australia to finish his survey of the coast. Starting at Cape Leeuwin at the extreme southwest corner, he surveyed the entire south coast, sailed through Bass Strait and arrived in Sydney again in 1802. After a refit, he continued on north, rounded Cape York, surveyed the north and west coasts, and reached Sydney a year later. Flinders was thus the first man, in one ship, to sail entirely around the continent and make detailed surveys and maps of the entire shoreline.

Largely as the result of the work of Bass and Flinders, and of course James Cook, the limits of the Australian continent were accurately determined. It was definitely established as one single continent, with no passages through the middle - it was not a group of islands. But nothing was known of the interior. The approximate locations of the largest cities, and all the state capitols, of present-day Australia were discovered, even though not settled. All of these cities, to this day, are on or very close to, the coast, and in fact over eighty per cent of the population of Australia even now lives within approximately thirty miles of salt water. From this time, then, the focus of exploration turned inward, looking toward what might be in the center of this large land mass.

Gradually, under the pressure of population which could not be supported within the sharply limited known area around Sydney, more was discovered about the land. The first necessity was to get beyond the rough mountainous country immediately west of Sydney. The Great Dividing Range stretches from the extreme

northeast corner at Cape York all the way down to the extreme southeast corner at Cape Everard - now known as Cape Howe. At no point is this range more than fifty to one hundred miles from the coast. Immediately south and west of Sydney there are what is known as the Blue Mountains, part of the Dividing Range, and a particularly rough and steep range.

A man by the name of Hume, whose family operated a large pastoral property northwest of Sydney, persuaded a friend named Hovell to go with him on a trip to find a way across the mountains. They crossed the Blue Mountains and a further range called the Snowy Mountains and reached the sea at Port Phillip, the site of Melbourne. The route they found, by keeping to the higher elevations instead of trying to find a way through the canyons, was entirely suitable for wagons and heavy traffic. Thus the bottleneck was broken, and the colony could expand.

To understand the exploration of the interior of Australia it is first necessary to have some idea of the rivers of the continent. This is not difficult, for there aren't very many, and they don't act the way Europeans or Americans would expect. In the first place, the mountains along the east coast cut off any chance of there being long and wide rivers along the east coast. What rivers there are tend to be short and fairly small. Like Sydney, Brisbane is built primarily on a bay. Along the south coast, behind which there are no mountains, not a single large river enters the ocean along its entire shore, except for some quite minor streams. The Murray River does flow into the ocean near Melbourne, but this river, although it is the major

drainage system for the entire eastern third of the continent, flows into the ocean through a lake and over extensive sand bars. The west coast also has few rivers, most not worthy of the name. The north coast, however, is quite different and there are a number of rivers, most of which are fairly short, entering the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Timor Sea. Where, then, does all the water go? What happens to the runoff after a rain? In the first place, there isn't much water, for the continent is quite arid. In fact, there is so little rain over the whole continent that the rate of evaporation is estimated to be greater than the rainfall. A map published by the Northern Territory in 1981 mentions that the rivers and lakes shown are "not perennial".

This absence of any large rivers flowing into the ocean led to a long-held belief that there must be a large inland sea. This belief is not entirely inconsistent with the general layout of the land, for the interior of Australia is remarkably flat, with an absence of any mountain range. There are a few isolated peaks and some quite short and not very high ranges.

The problem of where the water goes and the lack of rivers and drainage systems gave further impetus to the desire to explore the interior.

Hume and Hovell solved part of the problem when they went overland from Sydney down to what is now Melbourne. They crossed the upper reaches of the Murray, and later another explorer found the Darling River and followed it until it ran into the Murray. This same man, Paul Strzelski, also kept to the high country, located the Snowy Mountains and found Australia's highest peak - Mt. Kosciuszko.

In general, Australian explorers were motivated by two quite distinct purposes. One purpose was almost entirely scientific; the second and more common was entirely practical - the search for good farming and pastoral land. The second group was doing primarily local exploration, hoping to gradually extend the limits of the farming and pastoral lands. While these men were largely responsible for the gradual opening up of inland Australia, they contributed little to the general knowledge of the continent and have been generally ignored. Then came the true explorers - the men who simply wanted to know what lay beyond the black stump.

Ludwig Leichhardt was a compromise between the scientist and the explorer. He was a Prussian, educated in botany, but also with a dark, romantic and obscure fascination for travel into unexplored country. Leichhardt made several expeditions from the vicinity of Brisbane into the unknown country to the northwest. After two unsuccessful attempts he finally completed the trip from Brisbane to Port Essington, now known as Darwin, finding that this part of the country was watered by a number of large and small, but quite short rivers, and much good pasture land. He seemed to have an uncanny ability to achieve bad relationships with the men who accompanied him, yet he always seemed to be able to recruit more men to go with him on further journeys. His first trip in 1844 on which he went around the base of the Gulf of Carpentaria and up to the top of Arnhem land and back to Brisbane added much to the knowledge of Northern Australia. It also particularly whetted his appetite to cross the continent from east to west through the very center. He made one abortive effort in 1846,



land which will support very few animals - yet land of tremendous potential, and which today contains the largest cattle stations in the world. This is the Barkly Tableland. The name is accurate. It stretches mile after mile flat as a table, with very few creeks or rivers but many streambeds which are rushing torrents in the rainy season and dry creekbeds at other times. It has very few trees, and these only along the alternately flowing and dry streams.

A man who contributed perhaps more than any other to the general knowledge and development of the interior was Captain Charles Sturt, an army officer and farmer. His first expedition, in 1828, with six convicts to carry his luggage, led to the discovery of the Darling River. A year later he set out again and discovered the Murrumbidgee, which he followed until it joined the Murray, and thence to the sea. This great journey of over 2000 miles made sense of the entire river system of the south. But it also damaged his eyesight and made it necessary for him to return to his farming and military duties.

But in 1844, at the age of 49, he was again able to return to exploration. He assembled a party of 16 men, 11 horses, 30 bullocks and 200 sheep to be eaten on the way, a boat, heavy carts and provisions for a year. One of his party was John McDouall Stuart, of whom much more was to be heard later. From Adelaide, they went first up the Murray, followed it to the Darling, and then turned north into unknown territory. It was now mid-October, the beginning of summer, but there was still some water about. But the land was uncompromisingly flat and dry. The center of Australia is a place of violent extremes - either drought or deluge,

and then set out again in 1848 on a trip from which he never returned. No trace of Leichhardt or any member of his party was ever found.

The record in the northeastern corner of the continent was climaxed with the work of Sir Thomas Mitchell, the Surveyor-General of New South Wales and Edmund Kennedy, his young assistant. They worked northwest from Sydney in 1844, opened up much of the country now located in northern and northwestern New South Wales and western Queensland. They located the source of the Darling River and the sources of other rivers which flowed down to join the Darling, Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers. This is the country behind - to the west - of the Dividing Range which later became prosperous farming country. Kennedy, alone, went further north, all the way to the tip of Cape York. This is still wild country crossed by many small rivers and streams, and is still the home of the most recalcitrant Aborigines. On his way back from Cape York, Kennedy was murdered by these Aborigines.

By 1848, then, the entire east coast was well known. This was also true of the land immediately to the west of the mountains. But still very little was known of the interior, and this interior was of vastly greater dimensions and was also thought at the time to be of vastly greater wealth and importance.

Leichhardt, and then Mitchell and Kennedy, had come back with stories of endless plains, and some rivers, and with stories of having seen land on which huge herds of cattle and sheep could be grazed. And these stories were correct - provided one saw the land in times of good rainfall. In times of drought it was, and is,

and the rainfall can vary from 30 inches in one year to 3 the next. The summer of 1844 was one of the most appalling recorded. From January, 1845, Sturt and his party were stuck on a waterhole for six months while the land dried up around them, unable to go forward or back until rain fell. The temperature rose to 132 degrees in the shade, and 157 in the sun.

By April it was a little cooler, and on July 12 a gentle but persistent rain fell, which soon became a downpour. Now they had to contend with floods. Sturt sent some of his men back to Adelaide, and with the remainder pushed on to the northwest. At what is now the extreme northwest corner of New South Wales, he established another base and left more men there. Sturt and one companion, with fifteen week's supplies, pushed on. Shortly he came upon a region which with reason he called the Stony Desert. Beyond it he had glimpses of the better land for which he was searching. But again he was among sand dunes, at the edge of what is now known as the Simpson Desert. So he fought his way back, having almost reached the center of the continent and about halfway across from south to north.

When Sturt and his party got back to the last base they had left they rested for a short time. They had been away for fourteen months, but Sturt would not give up. He set out for the north again, taking Stuart and two other men, with eight horses. One of his men was left in charge of the base, with orders to retire only if the water gave out or the men became ill. In that case he was to leave a message in a bottle in an agreed place. This time Sturt kept to the east of the first track, and soon came

upon several creeks. This revived his hopes of an inland sea. Alas, they came again upon the Stony Desert. Yet they persisted until they were about out of water, and again had to retreat.

Still not ready to give up, Sturt changed course again and followed the creek north, thinking that at last they were on the true path to a really broad expanse of water. They found good grass and heavy timber, and finally they did find a lake. They also found large concentrations of Aborigines, whom Sturt tried to question at length. Finally, about 120 miles from where they had started up this stream the Aborigines indicated that there was no water beyond that point. This broad and fine creek, Sturt named Cooper's Creek, which later became the destination, and the salvation, of many later expeditions.

Finally, even Sturt had enough, and the party turned homewards. The march south from Cooper's Creek was worse than anything they had previously encountered. A fearful hot wind sprang up, the thermometer burst at 127 degrees. When finally the weaker animals could stagger no longer, Sturt and Stuart rode on alone to get help, and on their last stage into camp they rode fifteen hours without dismounting. The camp was silent - stores, animals, men had all vanished. They found the bottle with the message that the water had become putrid and the men all had dysentery. The small pool of water was covered with a slime that was green on top and red below. The next day the other two men dragged themselves into camp. One of them took the best horse, went back to recover some supplies and a kettle, and after two more days without food or water they were able to boil some water and make some damper.

But they still had 67 miles to go to the new camp to which the other party had retreated - a distance they accomplished by riding twenty hours without stopping. On arrival, Sturt collapsed and could not be moved for three weeks.

Sturt and his party had failed in their main objective, but much had been accomplished. They had come to within 150 miles of the center and had lived there for more than a year. Now any future expedition had a much better idea of what conditions to expect in the center in the summer months. The major dangers, of course, were hunger, thirst and the awful heat. It was also proved that the Aborigines were not dangerous, and in fact could be most helpful. Perhaps another accomplishment was the training and experience that Sturt's assistance, McDouall Stuart had acquired.

Sturt himself never went exploring again. His eyes troubled him again, and a few years later he returned to England.

In spite of Sturt's trail-blazing efforts and the work of Leichhardt, Kennedy and others who had reached the north coast from the area around Brisbane, the center of the continent was still entirely unknown, and no one had been able to cross directly from south to north. It remained for John McDouall Stuart to fill in this part of the map. Actually, there was little to fill in - dry lakes, stony deserts, sand deserts, a few bare mountain ranges, and a few riverbeds that are dry except after the rare rainstorms. But to Stuart it was a challenge.

In March, 1860, Stuart set out to get to the center, and to continue on north to Darwin. His first two attempts got him almost to the center, but it was not until the third, in 1862, that he made it all the way. This time he went to the west, rather

than the east, of Lake Eyre, found the spring at Alice Springs, and then went straight north to Darwin. By now camels had come into fairly common use in the interior, and Stuart was among the first to use them, in spite of his dislike for them. His route is still the only route from south to north, and from Adelaide to Alice Springs the railroad follows his track almost exactly, as does the paved road on up to Darwin. Ten years later, in 1872, the first telegraph line across Australia was built to connect Adelaide, and thus all of Australia, to the undersea cable being laid from Singapore to Darwin, and this line also followed Stuart's trail.

Stuart was not the first to traverse the continent, but he pioneered the only practical route.

The honor, if such it was, of being the first to cross from south to north belongs to the Burke and Wills Expedition. A more unlikely expedition would be hard to imagine. This was a semi-official effort, backed by the most influential men in Melbourne, well financed, and with backing from the pastoralists north and east of Melbourne. To lead it, Robert O'Hara Burke was chosen. He had no previous experience with this sort of thing. He knew nothing of science, or surveying. His temperament was mercurial, he was imaginative, headstrong, and, paradoxically, too brave. He had no reputation as a bush man, and in fact once lost his way when travelling along a well-beaten path not far from his home.

Second in command was the only capable and reliable member of the party - William John Wills. Young Wills had learned surveying, so was now appointed to go with Burke, of whom he was the exact opposite. Yet they got along famously.

This group also relied on camels - but they took much more than camels. The party was huge - men on horses, men riding camels, other men walking, Afghans leading the camels loaded with supplies, and many wagons. It seemed almost like an army with its supply train - and was just as hard to get moving.

Burke and Wills did get to the gulf, they did discover much land which has since been developed into good cattle country, and they did win the race to the gulf - and they both died on the return journey. But the route they followed never did become the main south-north highway. There were, however, other results, for many rescue parties were sent out from Melbourne, and these added much to the knowledge of Central Australia.

These two groups - Stuart on the one hand and Burke and Wills on the other - were totally different. Stuart was a true explorer - Burke was an adventurer.

It is evident from the sagas of Captain Sturt, Burke and Wills and McDouall Stuart that these early explorers were a remarkably tough and sturdy lot. Many of them had come to Australia to administer the penal settlements, but they preferred the life of the pastoralists and the freedom of the bush. Edward John Eyre, after whom the dry lake in the center is named, was certainly one of them, and perhaps one of the more remarkable. He made many excursions into the area north and west of Adelaide, and particularly in the wild country of western Australia. Although he made several trips in that area, perhaps one of his early ones best typifies his adventures and discoveries, as well as the nature of the country.

Edward Eyre was by trade a drover, meaning that he made his living driving large herds of cattle from Sydney to the distant

settlements, where they could be sold at a good profit. So by the time he was 25 he had probably travelled farther in the bush and had more knowledge about survival in the bush than anyone.

By 1840 there remained for Eyre one major achievement - to open up a stock route over which cattle could be driven across southern Australia from Adelaide to Albany on King George Sound, at the southwest corner of the continent. To state merely that this is a distance of about 1500 miles is completely inadequate. This was an impossible proposition. Even today no man would attempt to make this journey on foot. There is today a railroad across this stretch, but there are no stations for almost the entire distance other than the railroad division points. For a thousand miles there is no good anchorage along the coast, and the southern ocean beats on the coast directly from the Antarctic. Where the coast is flat the salt water sweeps inland, and where there are cliffs they are hundreds of feet high and prevent access from the land to the beach. Inland, the country is flat and desiccated with an occasional patch of rough scrub. Mostly it is an endless plain covered with coarse saltbush. Nowhere is there any water, except that which may be found by digging for it among the sand dunes along the shore or at the base of the cliffs. This is the Nullabor - an area which most Aborigines avoid.

It was this country which Eyre proposed to cross with a party of six men - three Aborigines, two other white men and himself. For a short time things went well, because they had a boat that followed them along the shore with supplies. But when they reached the last point at which a boat could come ashore - less than one-fifth of the way - Eyre decided to send back all the men



except one white man and three natives. The white man was his overseer, Baxter, and the Aborigines were Wylie, from the Perth area, and two boys from the Adelaide area.

Eyre and Baxter were certainly not at home in these strange and harsh surroundings, but the Aborigines were, for the time being, perfectly comfortable. They could pick up lizards and grubs to supplement the ration, and as long as water could be found they could put up with the fearful heat and the long daily marches. Usually Eyre was able to discover from the few wild natives they met where the next water could be found, and while the others rested he would go on ahead and lay out a series of caches of food and water. Then he would return to the base and the whole party would make a forced march of perhaps as much as 130 miles, often for days and nights on end, to get through to the next water point. Then it would all start over again. Gradually they abandoned great-coats, pack saddles, cooking pots, even guns and ammunition. When the weaker horses could do no more, they were either slaughtered and eaten or left to die. Whether they walked along the beach or took to the scrub inland, at the end of every day they were faced with the task of digging for water.

At the end of five months they had gone about halfway, and there was still no sign of the country getting any better. They were long past the point of no return. The rations were on the point of giving out, and the three natives were getting sullen.

By now the journey had lost all meaning. Obviously no stock route could ever be opened around the bight. Only survival now mattered. One evening, after a storm blew up with heavy clouds,

they camped for the night on some flat rocks which would catch water if it rained during the night. Late in the evening, Eyre went to gather the horses which had wandered off in the scrub. Returning with the horses, Eyre saw a flash and the report of a gun. Wylie came running to Eyre, saying that Baxter had been shot and the boys had run off. The boys had stolen some supplies, and two double-barreled guns. Eyre was now at the mercy of the boys, for they had the only serviceable weapons. All he had left were two pistols for which he had no ammunition and a rifle in which a bullet had jammed.

Next morning Eyre, the drover from England, and Wylie, the Aborigine, continued. Late in the afternoon Wylie called Eyre's attention to two figures advancing toward them through the scrub. It was, of course, the two boys, wearing blankets, and each of them carrying a rifle. Eyre felt that he was a match for them by day, but he feared a night ambush. Fortunately he was able to scare them away.

By now Eyre and Wylie had travelled 138 miles from the last water, and the horses had had no water or feed for five days. At last they found a trail down to the beach, where they found a native water hole. They rested for three days, being careful to sleep at a distance from the water hole in case the boys should attempt a night ambush. In fact, the boys were never heard from again.

Then, while still 300 miles from their destination, Eyre saw a small boat out on the ocean. It did not respond to their frantic signals, nor did two other small boats he saw soon after. He realized these must be whaling boats, and the mother ship could not be

far away. Then suddenly, he saw a fine schooner riding close to shore. His signals were seen, and soon he and Wylie were comfortably ensconced on board. For two weeks, while a storm raged, they stayed on the ship.

After this pleasant interlude, the captain put them on shore again, after giving them ample supplies. He even shod the horses, making horseshoes out of an old harpoon.

The rest of the journey was uncomfortable, but at least not hazardous. For three weeks they floundered through mud and swamps. After nine long months, Eyre and Wylie came at last to their goal in a driving rainstorm. For Eyre it was a moment of triumph. He had come a long way and had long since been given up for dead. He himself admitted that he had discovered nothing of importance. But he had made the unknown known, and he had, as Alan Moorhead wrote, "put a girdle across the country from the east to the extremest west".

Australia was, for all practical purposes, discovered by Captain Cook in 1770, was first settled by the English as a penal colony in 1788, and less than eighty years later the entire continent had been covered. Every part of the coastline had been mapped, it had been traversed from east to west and south to north, large cities had been founded, and there were many large and prosperous pastoral enterprises. It was a civilized country, and its future was secure. The names of Cook, Bass, Flinders, Hume, Hovell, Leichhardt, Kennedy, Sturt, Eyre, Stuart, Burke, Wills - men who wanted to know what lay beyond the black stump - are as well known and respected in Australia as Boone, Lewis, Clark, Crockett and LaSalle are in this country.