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**NIET**

**THE FRIENDS' SCHOOL**

**THE BURKE AND WILLS EXPEDITION**

History essay

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## **The Burke and Wills Expedition**



**Perished by Sidney Nolan**

### **Question**

Why did Burke and Wills go on the expedition south to north across Australia and what were the consequences?

### **Descriptor**

This essay is about Burke and Wills and why they went on the expedition. Burke set out seeking fame and to be the first to cross Australia from south to north. The consequences are many. The story has been argued over and again and continues through art and writing.

Robert O'Hara Burke and the Victorian Exploring Expedition set out on 20th August, 1860 on a journey from the south to north of Australia to find out whether there was an inland sea and to meet "Burke's desire to gain acclaim" for being the first person to make the journey and map the countryside.<sup>1</sup> The expedition, later known as the Burke and Wills Expedition because William John Wills, who Burke eventually made second in command, and Burke were the two to reach the furthest northern point and both died. Burke and Wills made bad decisions which led to their deaths but at the time were seen as heroes. Later Burke became seen as a foolish man with a short temper whose expedition succeeded despite him. The consequences of the Burke and Wills Expedition made them important in Australian history. These consequences included: affirming there was no inland sea and mapping the territory, lessons learned from King's relationship with the Aboriginals, the importance of preparation, being called a Burke has become an insult, camels helped open Australia's deserts areas, and their story has interested artists and storytellers.

The first consequence of the expedition was that Burke and Wills managed to go from south to north without finding the hypothesised inland sea.<sup>2</sup> They arrived alone at the northern most point but did not make it to the coast because of the mangroves. They had left behind Charles Gray and John King at at Bynoe River and the rest of the expedition with John Brahe in command at Coopers Creek with orders to remain there for three months. The inland sea that they were searching for was thought to exist due to the fact that all the rivers ran inland. Many convicts also escaped and headed inland and never returned and this reaffirmed the theory of the inland sea. A further consequence was that the men of the search party sent to find Burke and Wills after they went missing, mapped the territory. Burke and Wills were meant to do this but did not leave any maps although Wills' journal was found by his body and this helped to explain the journey.

There were lessons to be learned from King's relationship with the Aboriginals because he survived by living with them after Burke and Wills died.<sup>3</sup> During the expedition King was able to get food from the Aboriginals as well as learn the location of water from them whereas Burke was more likely to shoot at them. Wills describes getting fish from the Aboriginals in his diary saying "we came to some Blacks fishing, they gave us some half a dozen fish each for luncheon" and later they took them back to camp and gave them more fish and nardu.<sup>4</sup> Burke and Wills died from starvation. When they joined Gray and King to go back to Coopers Creek to find Brahe they had only had a third of their rations left.<sup>5</sup> On the way Gray was found stealing extra

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<sup>1</sup> Tayleur, Karen, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, Fitzroy, Victoria, black dog books, 2010, p.9; 'Australian History: Burke and Wills', accessed <http://www.australianhistory.org/burke-wills>

<sup>2</sup> Tayleur, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p.9 and p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Australian National Museum, 'Victorian Expedition Breastplate', [http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights/victorian\\_exploring\\_expedition\\_breastplate](http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights/victorian_exploring_expedition_breastplate); 'Australian History: Burke and Wills', accessed <http://www.australianhistory.org/burke-wills>; Cash, Damien, "Burke, Robert O'Hara" *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*. Ed. Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre. Oxford University Press, 2001. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. State Library of Tasmania. 28 June 2012 <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.education.tas.gov.au/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t127.e250>

<sup>4</sup> Wills, William John, Diary transcripts, National Library of Australia website, accessed <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/36391/20030707-0000/www.nla.gov.au/epubs/wills/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Australian National Museum, 'Victorian Expedition Breastplate', [http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights/victorian\\_exploring\\_expedition\\_breastplate](http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights/victorian_exploring_expedition_breastplate)

rations and was given a harsh beating from Burke which eventually resulted in his death. King reported that it took a whole day to dig Gray's grave because they were so exhausted.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately Brahe had already left when Burke, Wills and King arrived at Camp 65. Brahe carved a sign into the tree saying "DIG 3 FT", which let them know supplies were buried.<sup>7</sup> Burke, Wills and King feasted which meant they were short of supplies again. When he was dying, Burke still had a gun in his hand to get rid of the Aboriginals while King survived living with them.

Burke's lack of experience at leading an expedition caused the next consequence which was the development of the modern day insult, "Don't be a Burke". A Burke is a dill or foolish person who does not make good decisions. This insult is rhyming slang: Burke and Wills, dill.<sup>8</sup> An example of a foolish decision by Burke was the "rash" choice to head towards Mount Hopeless instead of waiting at Coopers Creek for a search party which led to Burke and Wills death.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting that a consequence of the Burke and Wills story is that it has become a part of modern language.

A major lesson of the expedition was that people learned never to go unprepared into the wilderness. Burke had no experience with exploration. The problem was Burke got his job through association instead of experience.<sup>10</sup> An example of his lack of experiences was leaving Melbourne carrying too much of the wrong supplies such as a stationary cabinet, 80 sets of camel shoes which ended up being useless, and a Chinese gong.<sup>11</sup> Burke's team was also made up of people that he had only heard of and people he knew.<sup>12</sup>

Another consequence of the expedition was the introduction of camels and cameleers, although not successful in this expedition, which became important in the opening of outback Australia. These camels were perfect for outback Australia because they could go thousands of kilometres without food or water and were also able to carry an additional 270 kilograms of mass. This expedition used 24 camels and eight cameleers from Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Before Burke and Wills, the Horrocks Expedition of 1846 used a single camel.<sup>14</sup> Afterwards

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<sup>6</sup> Tayleur, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p.22; Wills, William John, *A Successful Exploration through the Interior of Australia from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria: From the Journals and Letters of William John Wills*, edited by his father William Wills, London, William Clowes and Sons, 1863, accessed <http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/downloads/Successful%20Exploration.pdf> p.232.

<sup>7</sup> Tayleur, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p.24

<sup>8</sup> 'Rhyming Slang Examples', accessed <http://goaustralia.about.com/cs/language/a/examples.htm>; 'Appendix: Australian English rhyming slang', accessed [https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Australian\\_English\\_rhyming\\_slang](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Australian_English_rhyming_slang)

<sup>9</sup> 'Australian History: Burke and Wills', accessed <http://www.australianhistory.org/burke-wills>

<sup>10</sup> 'Australian History: Burke and Wills', accessed <http://www.australianhistory.org/burke-wills>; Damien Cash "Burke, Robert O'Hara", *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*; Tayleur, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p 8.

<sup>11</sup> Tayleur, Karen, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p.8.

<sup>12</sup> Tayleur, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p 8.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, Philip and Anna Kenny, *Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s-1930s*, Revised Edition, Kent Town, South Australia, Wakefield Press, 2010, p.37; Tayleur, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p.12.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, Philip and Anna Kenny, *Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s-1930s*, p.39; Tayleur, *Burke & Wills: Expedition off the Map*, p.12.

camels were used for carrying supplies across the desert for the creation of the telegraph line and the trans Australian railway line.

The Burke and Wills story has become important in Australian storytelling. Many artworks tell their stories such as Sidney Nolan's *Perished*.<sup>15</sup> Sidney Nolan painted many pictures of Burke and Wills in his career.<sup>16</sup> Ken Barrett's poem displays Burke, Wills and King as failures because they never came home but F. M. Hughan displays them as heroes because they completed their task with heroism.<sup>17</sup> The poem by F. M. Hughan was chosen from many published in the Melbourne Herald in 1861 by Wills's father for the book he edited about the journey.<sup>18</sup> This shows that Wills's father thought Burke and Wills's trek across the continent was not in vain. These two poems show just some of the different ways of viewing this story.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the Burke and Wills Expedition was a success in that it achieved the aims even if Burke and Wills did not and made many foolish decisions that lead to their deaths. Whether they were a success or failure, heroes or fools is opinion debated through artworks and writing, including poetry, stories and history books. Regardless of how Burke and Wills are seen, there were many positive consequences from their expedition.

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<sup>15</sup> Nolan, Sidney, 'Perished', National Portrait Gallery, Open Air: Portraits in a Landscape exhibition accessed <http://www.portrait.gov.au/exhibit/openair/exhibitions7.html>

<sup>16</sup> Pearce, Barry, *Sidney Nolan, 1917-1992*, Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007; Nolan, Sidney, 'Burke at Cooper's Creek, 1950', <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/OCEANtoOUTBACK/Detail.cfm?IRN=76604>; Nolan, Sidney, 'Burke, 1962', Art Gallery of New South Wales, accessed [http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/search/?on\\_display=y&exhibition\\_id=2809](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/search/?on_display=y&exhibition_id=2809);

<sup>17</sup> Barrett, Ken, 'Burke & Wills', poem published 1906, accessed <http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Bibliography/Poems/barratt.htm>; Wills, William John, *A Successful Exploration through the Interior of Australia from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria: From the Journals and Letters of William John Wills*, p.376-378.

<sup>18</sup> Wills, William John, *A Successful Exploration through the Interior of Australia from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria: From the Journals and Letters of William John Wills*, p.376.

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