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An epic journey into history

JONATHAN KING

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THE LAST HOURS OF MR WILLS.

The last hours of Mr Wills.

ONE of the greatest ironies of the epic 1860 Burke and Wills expedition from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria, embarked upon 150 years ago this August, was the utter contempt with which the explorers regarded the Aborigines, without whom they could not have reached their destination nor survived as long as they did in the inhospitable outback.

The explorers may have distrusted "the blacks", shot at them and spurned offers of friendship, but the Aborigines kept coming back to help them. Biting the hand of friendship almost to the last, Wills described these tribes as "mean-spirited and contemptible in every respect". Admittedly he changed his tune when the Aborigines were his only source of food while he was dying of malnutrition, but even then he wrote: "I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months."

In the end, by repeatedly refusing to reframe their attitudes towards Aborigines, the explorers sealed their own fate. Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills died of malnutrition beside Cooper Creek in this Aboriginal land of plenty where the Yandruwandha people had lived for thousands of years. Only one member of the party, John King, who joined the Aborigines, survived to tell the tale.

Yet 150 years later, hospitable Aboriginal tribal elders and leaders along that 1860 track are getting ready to roll out the red carpet again - this time to welcome a 2010 expedition retracing the route of Burke and Wills for an environmental audit.

The journey is being made under the auspices of the Royal Society of Victoria, which organised the 1860 trek.

Following the same timetable and route, the Environmental Expedition is to leave Melbourne's Royal Park on August 20 this year, aiming to reach the Gulf by February 11 - just under six months later. The expeditioners then hope to return to Cooper Creek by April 21, 150 years to the day after Burke's party arrived.

Just as in 1860, the Royal Society of Victoria has instructed the expedition to focus on land and water - but with a big difference. In 1860, it had asked Burke to find land and water that could be exploited by pastoralists.

Today, the Royal Society - which is also seeking help from the Australian Conservation Foundation and federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett's Caring for our Country program - wants the expedition to assess the damage to that land and water after 150 years of exploitation, and to work out ways to repair that damage. Many rivers Burke had to swim across are now bone dry.

Under the executive leadership of patron, actor and environmentalist Jack Thompson, it will be a two-stage expedition with specialist environmentalists using detailed maps to follow the 1860 route and timetable and four-wheel-drive vehicles. The intention will be to match the brisk pace set by Burke and his team.

On the first stage, team members will work with locals to log major environmental issues including drought-induced soil erosion, feral rabbits, goats, camels and cane toads. In the second stage, environmentalists will study the most pressing of these issues at a more leisurely pace, using camels in areas, as Burke did, and seeking possible solutions such as revegetation.

The 32-week expedition is being organised into 16 fortnightly legs and there will be room for volunteers. The size of the expedition will depend on what funding the organisers are able to raise from government and corporate sponsors.

A journal documenting the environmental changes and issues, along with the

documentary film record of interviews and problems, will be presented to the Royal Society to be passed on as a report to federal and state governments.

This time, however, aware of the damage Europeans have done along the track since 1860, Thompson and his expedition will be going out of their way to consult local indigenous rangers such as Birdsville's Don Rowland, manager of Simpson Desert National Park, who is already engaged in repairing some of the damage and is happy to share his inherited indigenous knowledge.

Expedition adviser and Reconciliation Australia co-chairman Professor Mick Dodson says this expedition will fare well if it "seeks the expertise, leadership and assistance of the many indigenous groups already working on environmental issues along the track".

As Menindee-based Aboriginal elder "Aunty" Beryl Carmichael of the Nyampa people told me during a recent reconnaissance trip: "We will give you a traditional welcome like you never had, with dancing and singing in our language. We will welcome you with open arms and embrace you all. We've got a lot of environmental problems up here, and if you are coming to help us repair the damage, we will work shoulder to shoulder with you because we have a lot of work to do."

This generous approach recalls the unqualified help provided by tribes along the track in 1860. According to Wills, the main journal keeper, writing in February 1861, Aborigines often offered directions on the best route to the Gulf. "We passed three blacks, who, as is universally their custom, pointed out to us, unasked, the best way ahead."

Aborigines also fed the dying explorers on two consecutive days in April 1861 when they returned from the Gulf. "As we were about to start this morning," wrote Wills, "some blacks came by, from whom we were fortunate enough to get about 12 pounds [five kilograms] of fish." Next day: "We had scarcely finished breakfast, when our friends the blacks, from whom we had obtained the fish, made their appearance with a few more and seemed inclined to go with us and keep up the supply." Later, "they also intimated that if we would go to their camp we could have any quantity of nardoo [a plant that could be ground with stones and eaten as a paste] and fish".

This was not all. In May 1861 Wills reported: "As I was about to pass the blacks' encampment they invited me to stay; I did so and was even more hospitably entertained than before, being on this occasion, offered a share of a gunyah [shelter] and supplied with plenty of fish and nardoo, as well as a couple of nice fat rats - the latter found most

delicious; they were baked in their skins."

The basic food staple nardoo kept the explorers alive for months, and could have sustained them indefinitely - had they learnt how to prepare it so it did not cause beriberi (a deficiency of thiamine, vitamin B1), from which they died. Moreover, as Burke noted on December 20, 1860, north of Cooper Creek: "We made it to a creek where we found a great many natives; they presented us with fish, and offered us their women."

Although Burke rejected the offer of female companionship, the Aborigines, undeterred by this puzzling response, invited them to dance in corroborees around the campfire. As Wills wrote: "A large tribe of blacks came pestering us to go to their camp and have a dance, which we declined."

Apart from food, the Aborigines repeatedly offered the stricken explorers accommodation in their camps, setting aside gunyahs, and when survivor John King was the last man standing they assigned him to a sub-group of three men in the Yandruwandha tribe with whom he shared the same gunyah. Later still, they gave King a Yandruwandha woman, Carrawaw (or Karrawa), from the eaglehawk totem group as a girlfriend, or ngumbu, with whom he had a daughter known as "Yellow Alice", or "Miss King", born in 1862.

Without the generous attention they received, Burke and Wills would never have made it to the Gulf or back to the Cooper. As it was, they were lucky to get through Queensland's Selwyn Range as some young warriors who wanted to kill them were only stopped by tribal elders who overruled the youngsters and demanded safe passage for the "whitefellas".

Even though Aborigines had killed previous explorers and attacked Burke's rival, John McDouall Stuart, that year, Burke and Wills did not realise the dangers. Wills wrote: "They are troublesome and nothing but the threat to shoot them will keep them away; they are however, easily frightened, and although fine-looking men, decidedly not of warlike disposition."

Yet had the Aborigines decided to spear these invaders, the naive explorers could have been killed in an instant. The South Australian *Register* dated November 26, 1861, even reported a grisly outback discovery of "the bones of white men having been killed and partly eaten".

Burke and Wills spent the last few days before they died seeking Aboriginal help, as Wills

wrote on June 29, 1861, just before he died. "We are going up the creek to look for the blacks, it is now our only chance of being saved from starvation."

When Burke died at the end of June, reported King, "on seeing his remains the whole party wept bitterly, and covered his bones with bushes".

But right to the end Burke had shot at Aborigines if they came near his camp uninvited or stole items as small as an oil cloth. The explorers were, of course, worried Aborigines would steal food or equipment essential to their survival. Most of all, however, these mid-19th century explorers were conditioned by the shared cultural perception of the day that Aborigines were "ignorant and godless savages".

So they failed to learn the language, and unlike Augustus Gregory and Ludwig Leichhardt, did not ask Aborigines for information about their planned route or water supplies along the way. Nor did they engage Aboriginal guides as had Matthew Flinders and Phillip Parker King, who both hired Bungaree to take them around the Australian coast in the earlier part of the same century.

The 2010 expedition will encounter very different conditions - and difficulties. In 1861, Burke and Wills' choices ultimately left them at the mercy of a harsh landscape. The new expedition will plot a landscape in retreat - and the thwarted efforts of traditional owners to reclaim it.

"Oh, we have so many environmental problems," Aboriginal elder Beryl Carmichael says. "The water is disappearing from the rivers down here, as greedy people take it out further upstream. Our Menindee lakes are drying up. Mining companies are destroying the topsoil with their growing network of roads, undermining the vegetation and desecrating our spiritual connections with our land."

Nevertheless, she promises to teach members of the expedition about the land and its precious water and how to preserve the environment for the next generation.

Further up the track, park manager Rowland told our visiting environmental expedition scout Steve Broomhall that he would help our team review myriad environmental problems he is dealing with and report back to government on what needs to be done to preserve this fragile region.

Although the Environmental Expedition may have its work cut out, there is some room for

hope. This time not only will the expedition be consulting indigenous Australians to begin with, but the environmentalists will be guided by the region's original inhabitants from start to finish - hopefully with a very different outcome to 1860.

Historian and author Jonathan King is organising the Burke and Wills 150th-anniversary Environmental Expedition. Volunteers who want to get involved can contact him on 0419 495 732 or the Royal Society of Victoria on rsv@sciencevictoria.org.au

The expedition will be supported by The Age, which also covered the 1860 event.

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