

Abstract Template

Topical theme

The Science and Mapping of the Victorian Exploring Expedition of Burke and Wills, and of the related relief expeditions of 1860-1862

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The Burke and Wills Expedition, officially the Victorian Exploring Expedition (VEE), left Royal Park in Melbourne on the 20th August 1860, under the sponsorship of the recently established Royal Society of Victoria (RSV), with specific instructions to record scientific information along the route (“Instructions furnished to scientific observers attached to the Victorian Exploring Expedition – Surveyor, Astronomer, Meteorologist, Geologist, Mineralogist, Zoologist and Botanist” in *Transactions of The Royal Society of Victoria*, Vol. 5, 1860).

John Macadam, as Honorary Secretary of the Exploration Committee, in a communication to expedition members, advised them that “You will cause full reports to be furnished...on any subject of interest, and forward them to Melbourne as often as may be practicable without retarding the progress of the Expedition”. There was, however, an important caveat under the heading of ‘General instructions for scientific observers’ namely, ‘Scientific observations or work that would cause hindrance, or otherwise interfere with the progress or necessary work of the expedition, never to be undertaken if contrary to the instructions to the Leader’. From the point of view of the scientific success of the expedition this latter instruction proved to be a major impediment. Robert O’Hara Burke actively and unapologetically discouraged anything standing in the way of his progress to the Gulf of Carpentaria, including collecting scientific artefacts.

William Wills was appointed as expedition surveyor and map maker, Ludwig Becker as artist and geologist, and Hermann Beckler as medical officer and botanist. For many years it has been commonly alleged that the VEE was an utter failure as a scientific expedition (see for example Murgatroyd 2002). No scientific reports of the expedition were ever published. It could be said that the ‘political’ took precedence over the ‘scientific’ agenda. Yet upon examination of the records and artefacts it can be argued that some useful pioneering science was done. Major surveying and exploration data was recorded, as well as botany, geomorphology, meteorology and astronomy, hydrology and zoology, and records also made about anthropology and archaeology. Four major relief expeditions were soon to follow similar routes to that of the VEE, and they also recorded much information of value. A review of the work of the VEE and the associated relief expeditions shows a wealth of scientific data and mapping which has not yet been widely recognised.

For some years Frank Leahey, a surveyor in the Department of Geomatics at the University of Melbourne, has been working in the field and revising the expedition's route, relocating campsites and recovering artefacts. He has reassessed favourably the surveying and scientific work of Wills during the expedition. Unpublished documents, scientific collections and a wealth of field sketches and paintings by Becker and others provide further scientific records, including observations of weather, astronomy, geology and geomorphology, rivers, lakes and soils. Some 2000 plant specimens, so far little studied, are in the collections of the Melbourne Herbarium. A search has begun in the Museum of Victoria for forgotten or overlooked geological and zoological specimens, with some recent success. A team of scientists has been assembled to examine and report on this material.

To coincide with the 150th anniversary of the expedition in 2010, a book aimed at the many people expected to take part in field trips and commemorations of the VEE will be produced under the sponsorship of the RSV. This will in a sense be the report that should have appeared in the years immediately following 1862, when after the VEE the RSV went through a period of decline, and the scientific data were not studied.

This new view of the scientific value of the VEE will be used in the planned Environmental Expedition, part of the celebrations of the VEE being coordinated by the RSV, which will travel from south to north along the original 1860 route and in the same timeframe, working with indigenous rangers and local conservation authorities to assess environmental impact over the last 150 years and to create plans for repairing this damage. The Burke and Wills expedition provides us, 150 years later, with a baseline for an audit of the land use, water availability, flora and fauna survival and exotic species invasion into the eco-system.

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