

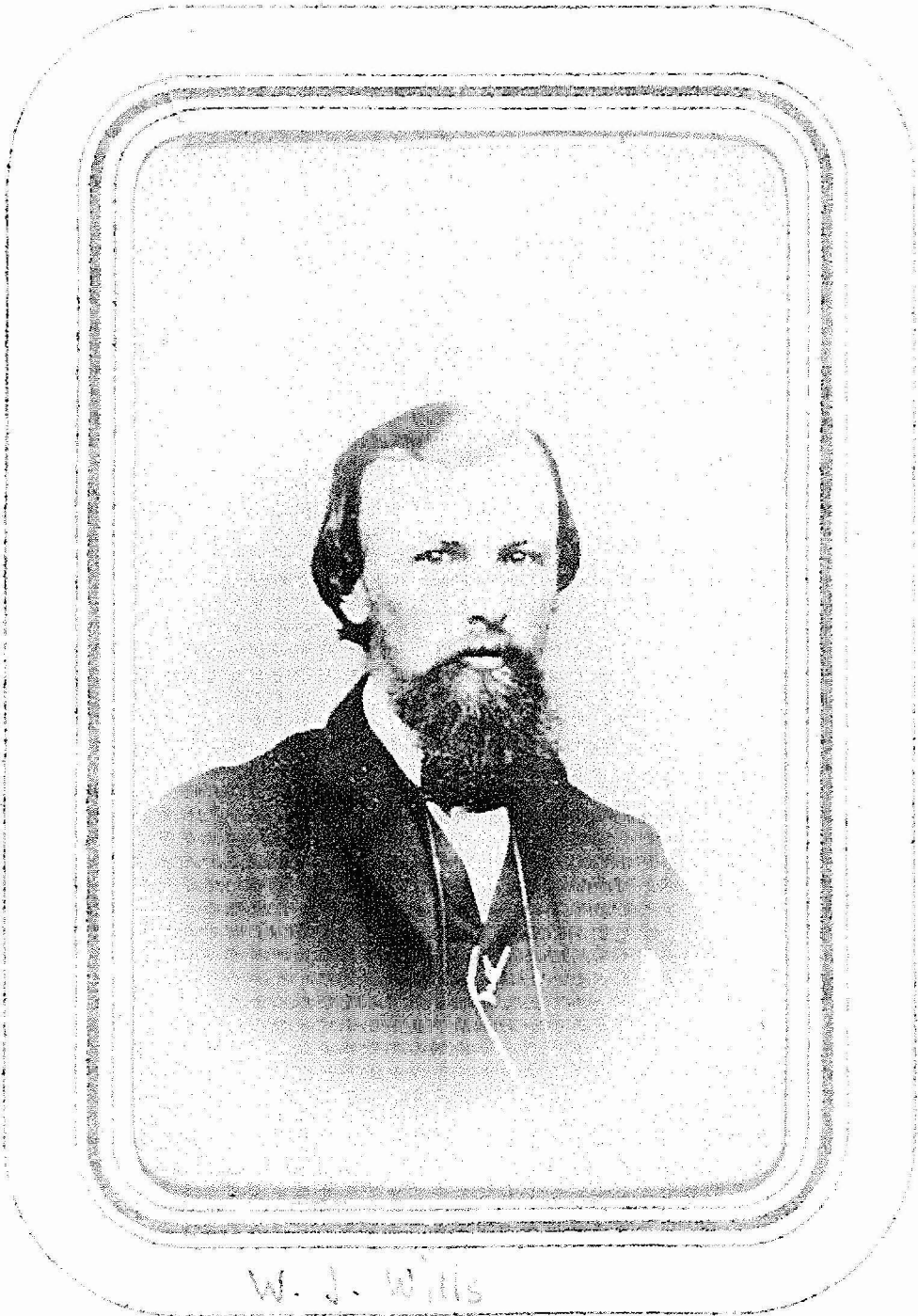
Dave Phoenix

## **‘All Burke’s books &c have been saved’: the Burke and Wills Papers in the State Library of Victoria**

THE BURKE AND WILLS EXPEDITION generated a huge amount of documentation, the single largest collection of which was deposited in the Melbourne Public Library in March 1875 by the expedition’s organisers, the Royal Society of Victoria. This collection includes manuscripts, maps, pictures and realia and contains some 12,000 plus pages in thirteen boxes. The Society, however, had not originally intended to place the archives with the Library, as they were hoping to use the material to compile an official history of the expedition. This publication never eventuated and many of the papers, particularly those relating to the expedition’s return journey from Cooper Creek to the Gulf of Carpentaria, disappeared in the intervening period between the end of the expedition and their transfer to the library. In addition, the records are unusual as the leader did not leave a comprehensive journal, so the archival material left by other members takes on particular importance: it is essential to understand who made them, why, and how their reliability can be assessed. What happened to them afterwards is an object lesson in the survival, or otherwise, of historical records.

The expedition’s somewhat erratic and often contentious progress generated increasing public interest, and the proceedings of the Society’s Exploration Committee were reported at length in the daily press. When telegrams, reports and diaries from the expedition were received by the Committee’s Honorary Secretary, Dr John Macadam, the new acquisitions were read and discussed before being released to the press for publication. The Committee considered these papers to be their property, notwithstanding the fact the expedition was funded by a combination of Government grants, public subscriptions and substantial anonymous donations. On occasions, the Committee even discussed suppressing the publication of documents that might not place themselves in a favourable light.

During the first couple of months, Burke kept in regular contact, with the first of a series of telegrams and despatches being sent to the Committee after the expedition had been on the road for just six days.<sup>1</sup> Most of Burke’s communications were brief and restricted to the very basic details of the party’s progress: the health of the camels, the progress of the wagons, the state of the roads, the cost of fodder or the latest dismissals and resignations. Once across the Murray and away from telegraph offices and regular mail service, Burke’s communications became increasingly infrequent and it was the scientific officers, Dr Hermann Beckler, Dr Ludwig Becker and William John Wills, who



W[illiam] J[ohn] Wills

Photographer unknown. Albumen silver carte-de-visite. Picture Collection, H37475/29.

submitted most of the communications to the Committee. Even though the scientific officers did not receive their official written instructions until they arrived in Swan Hill, all three officers had started making observations and keeping diaries from the time they left Melbourne.

In his capacity as expedition surgeon, Beckler only submitted one medical report and this was at the end of his employment.<sup>2</sup> However, he also acted in the role of botanical observer and his instructions, drawn up by the Government Botanist Ferdinand von Mueller, recommended that 'the Botanist attached to the Caravan should keep a diary in which the principal botanical features of the country should be noted'.<sup>3</sup> Beckler did keep a comprehensive diary, but surprisingly only submitted sections to the Committee, most of which were never published.<sup>4</sup> When Beckler returned to Germany in 1862, he took the larger manuscript with him with the intention of using it as the basis for a German language publication.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that Beckler had intended submitting the diary, but after a dispute with Burke and his subsequent resignation, decided against it. Burke's impatience at the delays caused by scientific observations and collections, and his insistence that Beckler take responsibility for the stores, meant Beckler had little time to collect botanical specimens. Beckler only started collecting in earnest after Burke left him with the rearguard after splitting the party at Menindee in October 1860. Beckler summarised the results of his botanical excursions into northern New South Wales in three reports, three maps and a dozen sketches, which were submitted to the Committee along with an extensive collection of botanical specimens.<sup>6</sup> Mueller categorised and commented on the collection, and the National Herbarium of Victoria now has over 800 specimens collected by Beckler, including over eighty type specimens.

The expedition's artist and naturalist, Becker, faced a similar situation when it came to pursuing his scientific obligations, with Burke insisting that he work as one of the ordinary men, which limited the time available for sketching and conducting observations. It is difficult to see what advantage Burke could have obtained from treating him in this manner. At fifty-two, he was the oldest member of the party and was paid two to three times what the ordinary expedition members were making. This meant he was the oldest, highest paid and probably least effective camel wrangler in Australia. Nevertheless, in addition to the six maps and sixty-four magnificent watercolours and sketches he completed under these difficult circumstances, Becker also submitted five reports and several letters describing native flora and fauna and also indigenous language and customs.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately for Becker it was not only Burke who hampered his scientific investigations, as repeated requests to the Committee for the 'things required for collecting and preserving objects of natural history' were ignored by Macadam. Becker lamented:

I am extremely sorry not having received even a single line from you especially in regard to the few things so much wanted by an observer in nat. history ... I fear I

by observation

38° 24' South

Date		Lat		Long		by observation		
186		38° 24'		South		by observation		
Time	Barometer	Thermometer	Wind	Clouds	Magn. Variation	Time	Field Book	General Remarks
12								
14								
15								
16								
17								
18	29.95	77.5	SE	5/10	0.5			
19								
20	29.95	77.5	SE	5/10	0.5			
21	29.95	77.5	SE	5/10	0.5			
22	29.95	77.5	SE	5/10	0.5			
23	29.95	77.5	SE	5/10	0.5			
Date		Lat		Long		by observation		
186		38° 24'		South		by observation		
Noon								
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								
11								

William John Wills, 'Surveyor's field notes'. MSI 3071 (Box 2082/6).  
 Wills recorded his daily travel from Balranald to the Gulf of  
 Carpentaria in nineteen of these field books.

shall leave for the Interior with only an outfit consisting of a few colours & sketch-books, and two small geological hammers.<sup>8</sup>

Becker also commented on the difficulties of carrying out scientific observations in the depot camp at Menindee:

Hard work in the camp, want of vegetables and of fresh meat, great heat with flies and moskitos [sic], are not apt to support one whose greatest desire is to try to unveil some of the mysteries of this country.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the difficulties they faced, both Becker and Beckler took their scientific responsibilities seriously, and in addition to their botanical and zoological observations, they began making 'a systematic registration on meteorology' as Government Meteorologist, Professor Georg Neumayer, had instructed they should do 'whenever a permanent camp is to be erected'.<sup>10</sup> Becker made five daily observations of atmospheric pressure, temperature, cloud type and cover, wind speed and direction, and when he sent the data down to Melbourne, carefully recorded in a small bound book, he proudly announced that his meteorological tables contained over '2,000 single observations, of

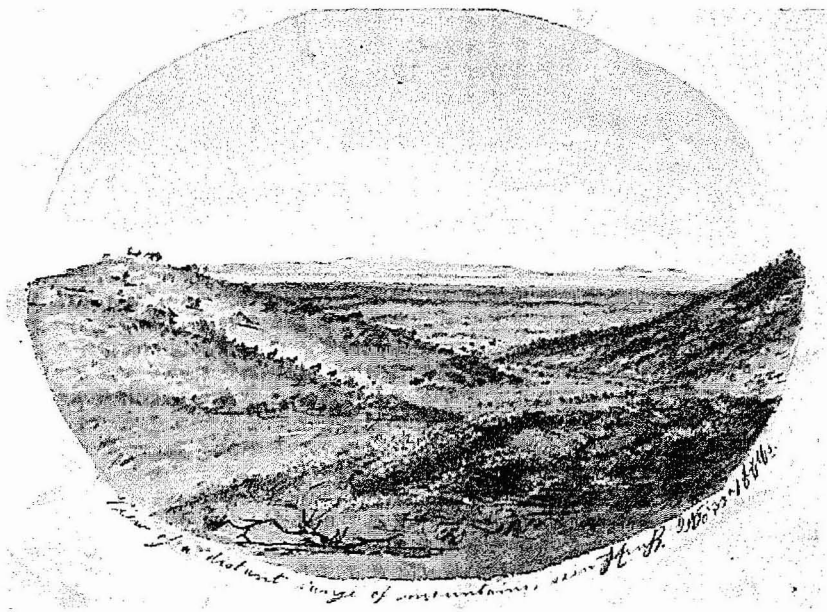


Robert O'Hara Burke  
Davies & Co. Albumen silver carte-de-visite. Picture Collection, H88.50/1; LTA 1960.

which not a few are rare or new'.<sup>11</sup> When Becker became too ill to make observations, Beckler took over the responsibility, and Neumayer expressed his satisfaction in 'the manner in which the journals have been kept under such trying circumstances' and recommended the Committee have the meteorological results copied in a form suitable for future publication.<sup>12</sup>

## II

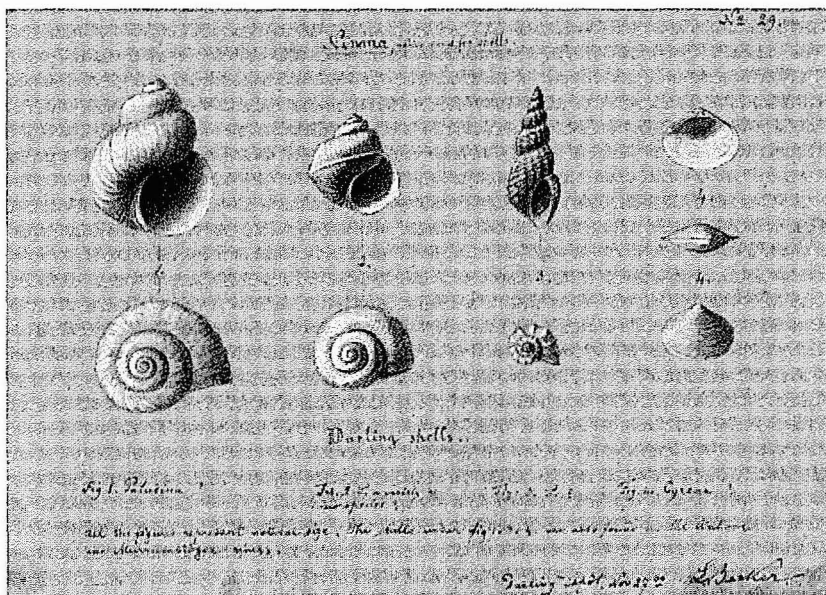
Although Burke actively opposed the scientific undertakings of the two German officers, he took a markedly different approach when dealing with Wills. William John Wills was the party's 'Surveyor, Meteorologist and Astronomical Observer' and the youngest of the five officers. As Burke had no navigational experience, he was totally reliant on the young Englishman for the success of the expedition. While Becker and Beckler's roles have been comprehensively assessed by Tipping<sup>13</sup> and Jeffries,<sup>14</sup> Wills' contribution



Above: Hermann Beckler, 'View of a distant range of mountains, seen from Gogirga hills'.  
Picture Collection, H16486.

Beckler painted this watercolour scene of Bilpa in the Scropes Range in November 1860. He visited this place during his first botanical excursion. Wills called this spot 'The Gap'.

Below: Ludwig Becker, 'Nenma, native word for shells. Darling shells'. Watercolour, 1860.  
Manuscripts Collection, H16486.



deserves further enquiry beyond the general acknowledgement that he provided the most comprehensive record of the expedition's progress.

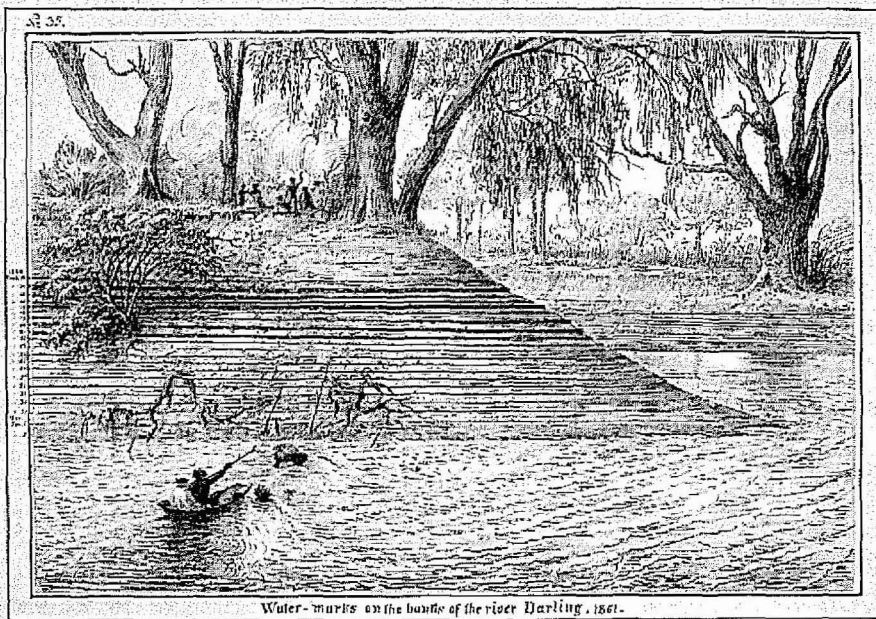
Wills was a gifted scientist, somewhat serious, and at times a little naïve. He had been interested in astronomy from an early age, but after being articled in his father's surgical practice in Devon at the age of sixteen, had studied chemistry at St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College with the view to a career in medicine. Wills arrived in the colony two days before his nineteenth birthday and only stayed in Melbourne for a week before finding the most basic of employment as a shepherd in Deniliquin. When Wills' father, Dr William Wills, arrived in Australia later in the year, they moved to Ballarat, where Wills again worked as an assistant in his father's surgical practice. Much of Wills' time in Ballarat is related in his father's book, published in England after the explorer's death.<sup>15</sup> However, in 1973, a series of letters from Wills to his family in Devon was purchased by the State Library of Victoria from the granddaughter of Wills' younger sister, Bessie.<sup>16</sup> These letters give greater insight into Wills' character and show that even as early as 1855 Wills had his hopes set on being part of an exploration party.<sup>17</sup> When he heard that Dr J. S. P. Catherwood, a visiting American physician and experienced traveller, was trying to raise £3,800 for an expedition to cross Australia from Mount Korong to the Gulf of Carpentaria,<sup>18</sup> he at once packed his swag and hurried to meet Catherwood. At twenty-one years of age, he still did not have the experience or knowledge to qualify him as an officer or scientist, but in any case, Catherwood's proposal came to nothing.

Later in the year, Wills began training as a surveyor when he was employed by the Ballarat District Surveyor, James Hamlet Taylor. After several months in the office learning the intricacies of trigonometry, Euclid drawing and geometry, Wills was assigned to a field survey party under a contract surveyor, Frederick John Byerley, a man who Wills thought was an excellent teacher. Byerley was contracted to survey the Kingower goldfields in 1857, and Wills, now aged twenty-three, was appointed head-labourer and then foreman of the survey party.<sup>19</sup> Foremen were required to be:

steady, competent young men . . . capable of assisting the surveyors by running check lines, trenching and having charge of the camps during the occasional absence of the surveyors upon other duties.<sup>20</sup>

Byerley must have assigned additional responsibilities to Wills, as it has recently been discovered that one of the survey plans submitted to the Department of Crown Lands and Survey by Byerley was actually drawn by Wills.<sup>21</sup> This is one of only five maps extant drawn by Wills, and the only one not in the State Library of Victoria.

Wills' hopes of becoming a qualified surveyor in charge of his own field party had a setback in 1858 when Byerley was suspended and then dismissed over an irregularity in one of his surveys.<sup>22</sup> As foreman, Wills was left to complete the survey and then dismiss the party.<sup>23</sup> Finding himself without employment, he decided to return to Melbourne. After a short spell as foreman of a party taking occasional surveying



Water-marks on the banks of the river Darling, 1861.

The drawing 'The Water-marks on the banks of the river Darling, 1861' is a fine example of the artist's skill in capturing the atmosphere of a scene. The composition is well-balanced, with the path leading the eye towards the bridge. The use of fine lines and cross-hatching to create texture and depth is particularly noteworthy. The watermarks are rendered with a delicate touch, adding a sense of movement and life to the scene. The overall effect is one of quiet observation and artistic sensitivity.

Ludwig Becker, 'Water-marks on the banks of the River Darling'.  
Ink drawing, 14 January 1861. Manuscripts Collection, H16486.

contracts around town, Wills came to the notice of the Surveyor-General, Charles Whybrow Ligar, who recommended him for a temporary position at the recently opened geophysical observatory at Flagstaff Hill. In early 1859 the temporary appointment became permanent. Wills moved into rooms at the observatory so he could devote more time to the hourly astronomical, meteorological and magnetic registrations, and under Neumayer he made good progress and became thoroughly engrossed in his new profession. Wills described his new boss as 'a true man of science' and Neumayer was astonished at his protégé's passion for astronomy. Wills worried that someone with greater experience might wrest his position from him and devoted himself to study, often at the Melbourne Public Library.<sup>24</sup>

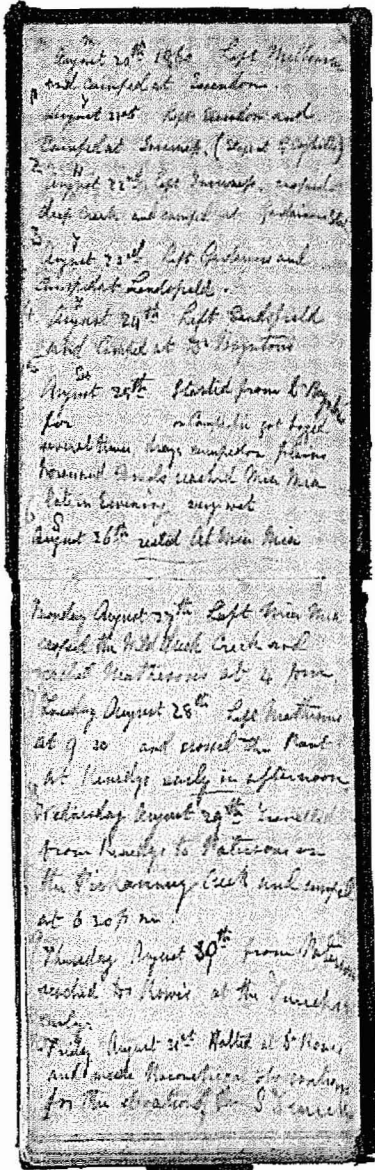
During this time Wills watched with interest as the Exploration Committee set about raising funds for the proposed expedition. As Wills' friendship with Neumayer developed, he had little doubt that the professor, who was a member of the Committee, would secure a place on the expedition for him to carry out magnetic observations.

Once Burke had been selected as expedition leader, the Committee appointed a five man 'employment sub-committee', which included Neumayer, to fill the vacancies. Six weeks before the expedition departed Melbourne, Wills was chosen, although at the time he did not realise the responsibilities included those of an officer and third-in-command. Nor did he enquire about the remuneration, such was his delight at being selected.

Wills departed Melbourne, aged twenty-six, with just four and a half years experience in the skills needed for inland exploration, a love of science, and an enquiring mind. Along with the two other scientific officers, Becker and Beckler, Wills began keeping a diary and making observations as soon as he left Melbourne. However, as he expected Neumayer to join them shortly with an assistant surveyor, his records for this early part of the journey were neither detailed nor comprehensive and he clearly did not intend the rough notes he scribbled in his little black notebook to be submitted to the Committee.<sup>25</sup> For the first two days out of Melbourne, Wills was preoccupied with getting everything in order, but by the third day he began the first of the scientific observations. After calibrating the aneroid barometers, he measured the change in atmospheric pressure as the wagons slowly descended from the township of Bulla to the wooden bridge at Deep Creek. Over the following days, Wills made a range of meteorological observations, and soon learnt that when mounted on a camel he could arrange the instruments on the saddle in front of the hump and make observations as he went along. When the expedition took a day off at Dr Rowe's station, Wills organised their first series of experiments. He climbed Mount Terrick, a 197 metre high granite outcrop, and made barometrical observations, while Beckler made similar readings simultaneously two miles away on the lowest point of the plain. Buoyed by the improving weather and relatively easy travel, the following day the three scientists used their spare time to climb Mount Hope, a slightly higher granite outcrop, and while Becker sketched the scene, Beckler collected flowering plants and Wills used his prismatic compass to read bearings to surrounding features.

Wills was anxious for Neumayer to join them, as not only would his presence be 'of great advantage', but would also be 'very pleasant'.<sup>26</sup> Neumayer, however, was busy installing new instruments at the observatory and knew that the heavily laden expedition would not travel particularly quickly. Even when he joined the party at Swan Hill, he was preoccupied with taking his own observations and allowed the expedition to get ahead of him again. When Neumayer finally caught up with the party at Lake Yanga, he began assisting 'in the organisation of systematic observations in the various branches of physical science and astronomy' and was 'chiefly employed in revising and comparing the instruments'.<sup>27</sup>

Once Neumayer arrived, Wills began recording the detailed survey of the line of march in the first of a series of nineteen surveyor's field-books. These small books were improvised from seven printed sheets removed from a larger surveyor's field notebook,



William John Willis, 'Memorandum book containing miscellaneous observations, calculations and notes'. MS13071 (Box 2083/1e). Covers diary entries from 20 August 1860 – the day of departure from Melbourne – to 30 August 1860 at Dr Rowe's station on the Terrick Plains north of Bendigo.

the sheets being folded in half and compiled so that each smaller volume would cover one week's travel. Willis entered daily traverses, time and bearing travelled, camp number and name, along with notable features, meteorological observations and occasional diary notes. Latitudes were recorded most days, and occasionally longitudes were included as well, both being calculated by either astronomical observation or, more commonly, dead reckoning. By the time the expedition reached Bilbarka on the Darling twelve days later, Willis had completed two of these books and had also drafted a map of the expedition's route.<sup>28</sup> Of the four surviving maps drawn by Willis during the expedition, this one is by far the most detailed and well drafted, and one can envisage Neumayer peering over Willis' shoulder as he drew, ensuring the high standard of his protégé's work.

At Bilbarka at the end of September 1860, Neumayer bade the expedition farewell, giving Willis 'as much advice and assistance as I possibly could for the successful carrying out of his undertaking'.<sup>29</sup> He returned to Melbourne with the instruments used for magnetic observations, as without an assistant surveyor it was obvious that Willis would not have time to fulfil this requirement and the business of navigating the party to the Gulf of Carpentaria took precedence. Neumayer also took with him Willis' two field-books, the map and a despatch from Willis to Macadam explaining the scientific observations he had made and the methods used. All these documents are now preserved in the State Library of Victoria. The astronomical observations that the pair had made were recorded in a small, improvised, 36-page notebook, which Willis later posted to Melbourne from Phelp's Tarcoola Station on the Darling.<sup>30</sup>

The Committee arranged for Neumayer to transcribe and reduce these observations, and he delegated the task to twenty-one year old observatory employee Edwin James Welch.<sup>31</sup> A few months later Welch would travel along the expedition's track himself, as surveyor on Alfred Howitt's 'Victorian Contingent Party' sent to search for the missing members of the Burke and Wills expedition.

Neumayer was well aware of the dissent among the party, but chose to ignore the infighting and even reported that the officers were all on excellent terms. This was far from the truth, and shortly after Neumayer left, Burke announced to Becker and Beckler: 'Now gentlemen, from this time you have to give up your scientific investigations, but to work like the rest of the men.'<sup>32</sup> Wills, however, was not subject to the same ultimatum. Because Burke had decided to split the party at Menindee, he had been deliberating for some time about which men to take on to Cooper Creek and who to leave behind. While Becker seemed happy to be given the opportunity of staying behind and catching up on his diary, sketches and proposed 'monograph of the plague of Australia, the Fly, with numerous drawings', Beckler was more ambivalent.<sup>33</sup> If he failed to proceed past Menindee, he would not be able to collect the specimens he required to further the career he desired as a botanist, yet if he continued on with Burke, he would be given little opportunity to pursue science anyway. Wills did not have such concerns, as he knew that he would have to be included in any advance party, and as a result of the close relationship he was developing with Burke, he did not feel his privileged position was under threat. This was made clear during an incident at Bilbarka, where Wills had a choice of making observations or helping load the camels. Burke had finally become so exasperated with the camels' slow progress and the many hours it took to load them that he threatened to leave them behind and proceed across the country with just the horses. In the midst of this dispute, an hour before their departure, Wills spotted a small dust devil or willy-willy, and:

About half past one I was fortunate enough to obtain some Barometrical Observations that I had frequently attempted but none before have been thoroughly successful in getting. A small whirlwind about ten or twelve feet in diameter came down the river it was moving very slowly, not nearly as fast as a man could walk, against the wind which was very light from the N.E. On taking in my hand aneroid No. 21548 I found that it read as follows; at fifty feet from the centre of the whirl 29.932 ... on approaching near the centre of the whirl the barometer fell rapidly to 29.890 I was unable to read it when actually in the centre on account of the dust. Having allowed it to pass the barometer rose to 29.920 on the out side of the whirl about eight feet from the centre. I again walked into the whirl and read the barometer as low as 29.880. Near the centre I fancied I could read 29.860 but the dust so blinded me that no [reliance] could be placed on this reading.<sup>34</sup>

One wonders what the others made of Wills' preoccupations as his inexperienced scientific colleagues struggled to load the camels.



allow him to pursue his scientific investigations, even granting him permission to leave the expedition's track and make lengthy side trips to investigate features named by Sturt in 1845.<sup>36</sup>

When Wright left the party to return to Menindee, Wills gave him his second surveyor's report which was written on eight sheets of blue foolscap paper, along with two field-books and two further maps of their route to date.<sup>37</sup> The maps were a smaller scale than the map given to Neumayer and were of a much rougher construction and far less detailed. Although Wright posted the report and maps to the Committee, the two field-books were left at the depot camp in Menindee and did not reach Melbourne until the following year. Again, all these documents have been preserved and are now in the State Library of Victoria.

Before departing, Wright, assisted by the two Aboriginal guides, arranged for Bandjigali guides to take the party over the Queensland border and up to the Bulloo River. From Bulloo, additional guides, either Karengappa or Kullilla, were arranged to take the party to the Cooper. However, partly as a result of Wills not knowing the indigenous name for Cooper Creek, and partly due to the difficulty of their intended route over the Grey Range, their guide was reluctant to enter the waterless mountains and he returned to Bulloo, leaving the party to their own devices. For the first time since leaving Melbourne, Wills was called on to navigate. The only other European to have ventured anywhere near this area was Sturt in November 1845, and using Sturt's map of the journey to the Macleay Plains, Wills led the party to the Wilson River, striking it within thirty kilometres of Sturt's furthest point.

Before leaving the depot camp on Cooper Creek to head to the Gulf of Carpentaria, Wills drew up a third surveyor's report from the six field-books he had completed since Wright's departure. The 5,000 word report was written on seventeen foolscap sheets and was accompanied by a rough map. Wills expressed his 'regret that I have been unable to devote as much attention to either as I could have desired'.<sup>38</sup> Burke's report was considerably more succinct, although he scribbled a postscript note on Wills' report explaining the situation:

As Mr Wills's report with which I fully concur contains all the necessary details with regard to the state of the country through which we passed, I have not referred to the subject in mine.

All these documents were entrusted to William Brahe, who had been left in charge of the Cooper depot camp. He delivered them to the Committee six months later when he returned to Melbourne to report that Burke and Wills had set off for the Gulf and had not returned. The field-books were not transcribed or published, although the third surveyor's report did appear in the press the following day.<sup>39</sup> Interest in the expedition's progress was such that Wills' rough map was sent to the Surveyor-General, and within two days the maps attached to the second and third surveyor's reports had been combined and lithographed for publication.<sup>40</sup> The documents Brahe returned to

Melbourne also survive and are all in the State Library of Victoria. This means that we have virtually all of the records produced by Wills on the journey from Melbourne to Cooper's Creek and these records give us a good understanding of the expedition's progress to this point. However, the records produced after this point were not as well cared for and most of them are now lost.

After leaving the Cooper depot camp, Wills continued using field-books to record his progress, filling one improvised book a week for the eight weeks it took to complete the trans-continental crossing. Wills also made eight maps, each one roughly relating to the distance travelled in the corresponding field-book. From Balranald to the Cooper, Wills had consistently filled in the traverse for every one of the fifty-nine days they had travelled, but had only made thirty-nine diary entries, failing to write entries for up to five days at a time. On the journey north from the Cooper, there is no reason to expect that Wills did not continue filling in the traverse legs every day other than the two days that they rested. Certainly King recalled that Wills spent an hour and a half each evening writing up his diary and 'he always carried a field book in his hand nearly the whole of the day going along'.<sup>41</sup> However, Wills started leaving more frequent and longer gaps in his diary entries, presumably as a result of the increasing pace, workload and summer temperatures. For the first two weeks out from the Cooper, he only missed four diary entries, but during the final three weeks of the trip in the wet season heat of January and February, Wills only made two entries.

At the expedition's most northerly camp, Wills started a ninth field-book which described the final attempt he and Burke made to reach the open ocean. During the first week of the return trip when the torrential rain and mud of the tropical monsoon was at its worst, Wills did not make any diary entries, but then he resumed regular, but generally much shorter diary notes, which were written in what was probably a sixty-eight page surveyor's field notebook which had been cut in half. He also made occasional meteorological observations in the other half of the dissected surveyor's field notebook and occasional astronomical observations in a leather bound note book.<sup>42</sup>

The Burke and Wills papers in the State Library of Victoria include an extensive series of meteorological observations made between November 1860 and April 1861 and recorded in two surveyor's field notebooks. These records have been attributed to Wills and are often used to demonstrate his dedication to the scientific task – a somewhat unrealistic proposal given the conditions they endured during the northern journey. In fact they were incorrectly attributed and they are not the work of Wills. They were actually made by Brahe at the Cooper Creek depot camp.<sup>43</sup>

When Burke and Wills returned to the depot camp to find it deserted with the instruction to 'Dig' freshly blazed on a tree, Burke expressed his disappointment in the situation in a note written on five pages torn from a small notebook. The note was reburied under the 'Dig Tree' in the camel-box that had been left by Brahe, but as Burke

May 30<sup>th</sup> 1861

We have been unable to leave  
the Creek. Both Camels are  
dead and our provisions  
are done.

Mr Burke & King are down  
on the lower part of the Creek  
I am about to return to them,  
when we shall all probably  
come up this way.

We are trying to hire the best way  
we can like the Blacks but  
find it hard work.

Our clothes are going to pieces  
I am sending provisions  
and clothes as soon as  
possible.

William J Wills

The depot party having left contrary  
to instructions has put us in the

William John Wills, 'Last notes', 30 May 1861. MS13071 (safe 1). The note Wills buried with his field books in the camel box at the 'Dig Tree'.

had decided to attempt to reach the settled districts of South Australia, Wills decided not to leave his field-books behind. However, five weeks later, when it was apparent that the three men could not identify Strzelecki Creek, and therefore could not follow Augustus Charles Gregory's 1858 track to safety, Wills returned to the 'Dig Tree' so that he could deposit 'some of my journals here for fear of accidents'.<sup>44</sup>

Wills kept a diary of their attempts to survive at Cooper Creek living on boiled nardoo sporocarps and the handouts from the Yandruwandha of fish and fat rats baked in their skins. As he had no new notebooks, he recycled the surveyor's field notebook that had been cut in half and used for meteorological observations on the way back from the Gulf. In this book, Wills made regular, and often extensive, diary entries despite the effects of prolonged malnutrition and exhaustion. However, by the end of June 1861 at Breerily Waterhole, he was unable to continue. Knowing that Burke and King's best chance of survival was with indigenous assistance, he insisted they leave him and proceed upstream in search of the Yandruwandha. They decided to bury the diary and Burke's notebook in the sand close to the shelter in which Wills was resting. After Wills gave them a final letter to his father, Burke and King left the young surveyor. He would be dead when King returned a week later.

King was eventually rescued by Alfred William Howitt, who recovered Wills' diary and Burke's notebook, as well as the field-books and maps buried in the camel-box at the Dig Tree. As sole survivor, King would come to realize his role in preserving the expedition documents, and would later state:

To have been the instrument for preserving from destruction the invaluable notes and other memoranda of the expedition is an honour of which I feel myself utterly unworthy . . .<sup>45</sup>

Howitt sent Brahe on to Melbourne with the diaries and journals to break the news to the anxious colonists. The recovery of the explorers' journals was all the more significant because of the leaders' deaths, as the press realised:

THE CONTINENT CROSSED – DEATH OF BURKE AND WILLS . . . All of Burke's books &c. have been saved.<sup>46</sup>

Without these records, the expedition to the Gulf would have been in vain.

#### IV

Brahe arrived in Melbourne with the 'bundle of papers' early on Sunday morning, 3 November 1861, and after they had been formally handed over to Governor Barkly, the Committee released selected parts to the press. However, requests for access to Burke's meagre notebook and Wills' ample diaries, which although legible 'appeared to have been written under the most disadvantageous circumstances' and were therefore not in such 'perfect order as to be immediately promulgated', were postponed until a full Committee meeting could be convened to 'take lasting possession of the documents of

those poor explorers who were now no more'. This occurred the following evening when the interest generated was so great that there was the highest attendance of any of the Committee meetings held during its sixteen-year history. The Committee felt it was 'the most sacred trust to pay particular regard to every line of the notes' and so a sub-committee was elected to transcribe the journals. Mueller was appointed the task of transcribing Wills' nine field books of the journey from the Cooper to the Gulf, journalist James Smith had Wills' diary of the return from Carpentaria, and Registrar-General, William Henry Archer, was given Wills' journal of their time at Cooper Creek awaiting rescue and also Burke's notes written in his small leather bound notebook. The Surveyor-General was given the responsibility for Wills' maps and Dr Wills was also appointed to the sub-committee 'as a matter of personal delicacy to the memory of the deceased explorer'. Although no schedule was determined for the sub-committee to report, the Committee's chairman, Sir William Foster Stawell, imagined they would 'commence their duties at once'.<sup>47</sup>

The sub-committee, eager to complete their task, met the following morning, but not everybody was happy that the Society had sole access to the journals. In the Legislative Assembly, John Hood MLA thought:

the Royal Society had committed itself quite enough in the matter (hear, hear), and some other parties should be appointed to arrange and prepare the papers (hear, hear).<sup>48</sup>

The transcribed journals and a tracing of the route were tabled at the adjourned meeting of the Committee held the following day. Reading the diaries took several hours and went on well into the night before the Society's Vice-President, Professor Frederick McCoy, moved a vote of thanks to the transcribers and suggested the original documents should be handled as little as possible as it was hoped that they would be put on display to the public in a glass case. Before this happened, the Society intended publishing a connected narrative of the history of Victorian exploration. It had become accepted practice for expedition leaders to publish their journals, but the Committee was faced with a problem because Burke had not kept a detailed journal or diary; in fact, they had not requested him to do so. It was the subordinate officers, Becker, Beckler, Wills, Brahe and even Wright who had kept more detailed accounts than the leader. The task of editing the various reports, despatches and diaries into a connected narrative was delegated to James Smith, who, as well as being a member of the Committee, had a background in journalism and was also editor of Melbourne *Punch*. Smith decided to fill the gaps in Wills' diary by visiting John King at his home in St Kilda to obtain a 'true and faithful account of proceedings'.<sup>49</sup> The need for an 'official' history of the expedition was deemed all the more necessary after the Commission of Enquiry's report into the deaths of Burke and Wills did not portray the Committee in a favourable light, and therefore 'a history of Victorian exploration published in two or three volumes, and illustrated with the aid of the magnificent materials which the committee had at hand' would make a

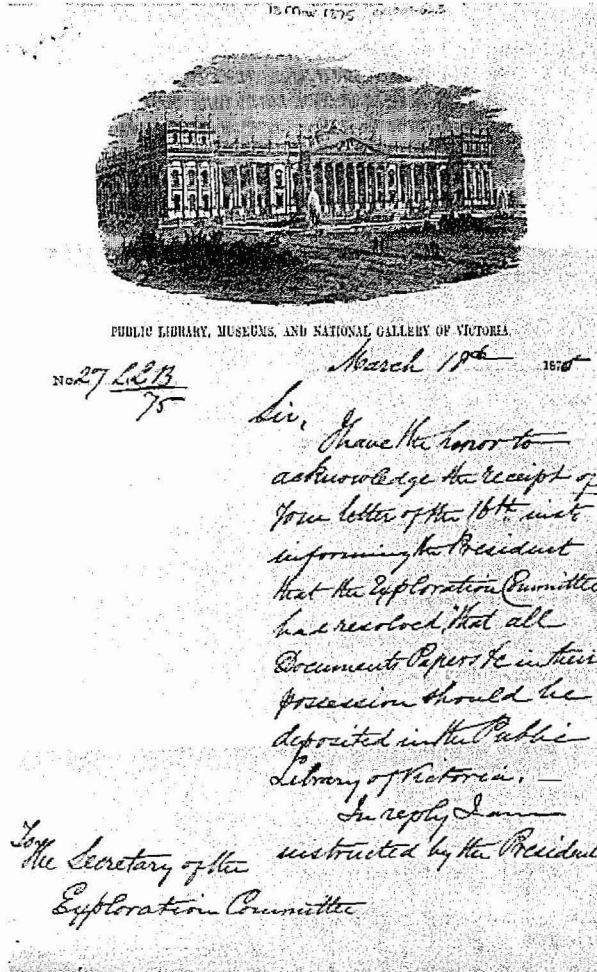
contribution 'to geographical knowledge which would reflect honour on the Royal Society'.<sup>50</sup> An offer from London publisher Richard Bentley was rejected because it would have meant relinquishing editorial control and a year passed with little progress made. A scathing editorial in the *Argus* stirred the Committee into action when it enquired:

is the publication of a brief and imperfect transcription of the few and bald notes recovered from the possession of the dead, all that the managers of the Exploring Expedition propose to do for the name and fame of our first heroes?<sup>51</sup>

Macadam assured the Chief Secretary that 'all the Expedition papers, note books, sketches, maps and records are carefully preserved' and hoped he would 'liberally support the Exploration Committee in giving to the world this accumulated mass of valuable geographical and other information in a suitable and permanent form'. However, the McCulloch Ministry wanted more information on who was to be entrusted with the work and Macadam did not get the £1,000 he requested. When the Treasurer called for expressions of interest, the Government printer estimated the cost to be two and a half times greater than Macadam's estimate.<sup>52</sup> To complicate matters further, James Smith developed 'overstrain from his severe intellectual labours' and even though he supported the publication of an official history, he did very little work towards drafting a manuscript beyond his interview with King. The official history never eventuated, although Smith later published a heavily embellished version of King's interview while working as a journalist on the *Australasian*.<sup>53</sup>

Although Macadam proclaimed the expedition's records were 'carefully preserved' the reality was very different, as all the diaries, notebooks and maps that were transcribed by the sub-committee during the first week of November 1861 subsequently went missing. As the Committee's assistant secretary had not issued receipts for the material, its ultimate fate is unknown, and the implications of this missing material for modern research into the expedition's route were discussed by Gerard Hayes in 'Paper Trails'.<sup>54</sup> Although the Committee had originally requested the members of the sub-committee take charge of the original manuscripts, when they met the following day they appear to have changed their minds and decided to secure the records in the safe in the Surveyor-General's office instead.<sup>55</sup> Three of the four members of the transcription sub-committee were in attendance at this meeting: Mueller, Smith and Ligar.<sup>56</sup> Mueller had taken his transcription away for publication the previous evening, and he appears to have distributed the thirty-seven blue foolscap sheets between the three main Melbourne newspapers. They were returned to the Committee and are now in the State Library of Victoria,<sup>57</sup> but it is not recorded whether the original field-books were placed in the safe at the meeting on 7 November, and they disappeared before the Society handed the papers over to the Library. Smith's transcription also went for publication and *Age* journalist Howard Willoughby signed a receipt for the document.<sup>58</sup> Three months later, the newspaper had still not returned the transcription and a dispute

'All Burke's books &c have been saved': the Burke and Wills Papers in the State Library of Victoria



Letter dated 18 March 1875 from Henry Sheffield, Librarian at the Melbourne Public Library, accepting the Exploration Committee's offer of depositing the expedition's records at the Library. MS 13071 (Box 2079/2).

erupted between the Society and the paper's owner, David Syme.

As Smith had not attended the meeting on 6 November, it was most likely Mueller who had handed this transcription to the press, and consequently he became involved in the altercation. Mueller was adamant he had only taken the transcription and had returned the original field-books to the Committee, and he refused to assist in recovering the transcription from the press.<sup>59</sup> Only a part of Smith's transcription was recovered. At some stage, most likely during the typesetting phase, the foolscap sheets of Smith's transcription had been cut into thirds or quarters and the final few sections went missing, so only the first eighteen sections of the transcription remain.<sup>60</sup> As the original

diary entrusted to Smith has also disappeared, the most complete record of the return journey from the Gulf to the Cooper is that which was published in the press. The Committee's records are equally vague in relation to Wills' eight maps which had been entrusted to Ligar. They may also have been placed in Ligar's safe on 7 November, but they too disappeared before they could be handed over and the only record of them is Ligar's tracing.<sup>61</sup>

Although Archer was a long standing member of the Society, he was the only person on the transcription sub-committee not to have been a member of the Expedition Committee, and therefore he did not attend the meeting of the 7 November when the documents were supposedly placed in the safe. Unlike the fate of those documents, the whereabouts of the documents entrusted to Archer's care are known, as they appeared for sale at auction as part of Archer's estate after his death in 1909.<sup>62</sup> Hayes sums up Archer's actions thus:

having prepared copies of these documents, [Archer] felt entitled to pocket the originals.

and he attributed the other disappearances to souveniring, which:

certainly went on during this period, mostly by Committee members who were supposedly custodians of this material.

At times this souveniring was blatant, and Smith even recorded 'procuring' teeth that fell from Burke's skull during the solemn coffining process.<sup>63</sup>

## V

The first European crossing of Australia aroused great public interest and the diaries and maps were considered highly important, particularly those relating to the journey from Cooper Creek to the Gulf of Carpentaria and back. However, once the information contained in these documents had been disseminated to the public, the original documents became less important and their disappearance was not cause for remark or concern.

We are poorer for the transcription sub-committee members' careless handling of the original documents, which resulted in their loss. This has left us with just copies, which in most cases cannot be compared with the originals for accuracy and, of course, the original artefact value has gone forever.

Nevertheless, it is equally remarkable that any documents survived to return to Melbourne at all, let alone still be in existence one hundred and fifty years later, given that three of the officers died on the expedition and the documents were subjected to the rigours of intense summer heat, wet season rains and being buried for many months in the desert. We are therefore fortunate that the final act of the Committee was to 'hand over [to] the Public Library . . . all their papers and documents carefully secured in a suitable box,'<sup>64</sup> thereby leaving us with a rich storehouse of historic treasures.

## Endnotes

### 'All Burke's books &c have been saved': the Burke and Wills Papers in the State Library of Victoria

1. Robert O'Hara Burke, Dispatch, *Mia Mia*, 26 Aug 1860, Box 2082/1a, MS 13071 Victorian Exploring Expedition Records, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria. (All boxes quoted hereafter are from either this collection or MS 13071 Royal Society of Victoria Exploration Committee Records (hereafter EC) unless otherwise stated.)
2. Hermann Beckler, Medical reports, 1861, Box 2082/4 (a and b).
3. EC Leader's copy of Instructions to the Geologist, Zoologist and Botanist, Box 2082/3b.
4. Most of Beckler's submissions to the EC were not released to the press, with the notable exception of his Diary, 21 Dec 1860-5 Jan 1861, Box 2083/3a, which was published as 'A Journey from the Darling to the swamp Duroodoo,' *Argus*, 6 February 1861, p. 6.
5. Hermann Beckler, Stephen Jeffries and Michael Kertesz, *A Journey to Cooper's Creek*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press at the Miegunyah Press in association with the State Library of Victoria, 1993, pp. xi-xlv. The SLV has recently acquired a transcription of Beckler's manuscript from the Heimatmuseum Hochstadt; Beckler, Papers 1855-[18-?], PA 260, SLV.
6. Beckler, Reports, Nov 1860, Box 2082/2e and Box 2082/4; Notes on plants, Box 2082/5 (c and d); Dispatch, Menindie, 6 Aug 1861, Box 2082/1c; Beckler's maps and pictures are in the Ludwig Becker sketchbook, H16486, Australian Manuscripts Collection, SLV.
7. Ludwig Becker, Five reports submitted between Sep 1860 – Jan 1861, Box 2082/4 (c-g); maps and pictures are in the Ludwig Becker sketchbook, H16486.
8. Becker, Report, Darling River, 22 Jan 1861, Box 2082/4g.
9. Ibid.
10. EC, Leader's copy of Instructions, Box 2082/3b.
11. Becker, Report, Box 2082/4g.
12. Georg Neumayer, letter to Macadam, 2 Sep 1861, Box 2082/5f.
13. Marjorie Tipping, *Ludwig Becker: artist & naturalist with the Burke & Wills expedition*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press for the Library Council of Victoria, 1979.
14. Beckler, Jeffries and Kertesz, *Cooper's Creek*, 1993.
15. William Wills (ed.), *A Successful Exploration Through the Interior of Australia, from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria*, London: Richard Bentley, 1863.
16. William John Wills, Correspondence and press cuttings, 1839-1861, MS 9504, Australian Manuscripts Collection, SLV.
17. Wills, MS 9504. Letter to Sarah Wills, 22 Apr 1855.
18. *Argus*, 2 Mar 1855, p. 4.
19. Dept of Crown Lands and Survey, Salaries Registers 1857-8, VPRS 15031/P1, Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV).
20. James Hamlet Taylor, Outward Letter Book, District Survey Office Ballarat, 1856-8, VPRS 15602/P1, PROV. Memo No. 58/102, 1 Feb 1858.
21. Plan of Goldfields in the Parish of Kingower, 1857, GF12, VPRS 8168, Historic Map Collection, PROV.
22. Parliament of Victoria, *Report from the select committee upon Mr Frederick Byerley's case*, Parliamentary Papers D25, Melbourne: John Ferres. 1858-9.

23. W. J. Wills, Foreman, 1858, VPRS 44 Unit 755, PROV. Wills was working at St Arnaud when his employment terminated in 1858.
24. Wills, *Successful Exploration*, p. 53.
25. Wills, Memorandum book, Sep – Nov 1860, Box 2083/1e.
26. Wills, *Successful Exploration*, p. 86.
27. Neumayer, *Results of the Magnetic Survey of the Colony of Victoria Executed During the Years 1858-1864*, Mannheim, Germany: J Schneider, 1869.
28. Wills, Surveyor's field notes, Box 2082/6 (a and b); Plan showing the route of the Victorian Exploring Expedition from Balranald to the Darling, MC1 D7 (H6196), SLV.
29. Neumayer, *Results of the Magnetic Survey*.
30. Wills, Astronomical observations Aug – Oct 1860, Box 2083/1c.
31. EC Minute books, Box 2088B/1, p.101, minutes, 5 [sic, 4] Feb 1861.
32. Becker, Fifth Report, Box 2082/4g.
33. Becker, Third Report, Box 2082/4e.
34. Wills, Surveyor's field notes, Box 2082/6c. Diary entry for 11 Oct 1860.
35. Application currently before the New South Wales Geographic Names Board based on research carried out by Dave Phoenix as part of a PhD being undertaken at James Cook University.
36. Burke Dispatch, Torowoto, Box 2082/1a (12); Wills, Surveyor's field notes, Box 2082/6e. Diary entry for 28 Oct 1860.
37. Wills, Surveyor's report, 30 Oct 1860, Box 2082/5a; Surveyor's field notes, Box 2082/6 (c and d); Maps relating to Burke and Wills, MCFB2 (H3427) and MC8/3 (H3428), both in MS 9091, SLV.
38. Wills, Third surveyor's report, Box 2082/5b; Surveyor's field notes, Box 2082/6 (e-j); Maps relating to Burke and Wills, MC8/3 (H4329), MS 9091.
39. *Argus*, 1 July 1861, pp. 6-7.
40. Dept of Crown Lands and Survey, 'Tracing shewing the route of the Victorian Exploration Expedition from Bilbarka to the Depot on Cooper's Creek', 2 July 1861, MAPS 809 ATE 1860 WILLS, SLV.
41. Parliament of Victoria, *Commission of Enquiry into the deaths of Burke and Wills*, Melbourne: John Ferres, 1862. Questions 180 and 744.
42. Wills, 'Journal of trip from Cooper Creek towards Adelaide,' 1861, MS 30/7, National Library of Australia (NLA); Astronomical observations, Box 2083/1d.
43. The two items currently listed in the Australian Manuscripts Collection as 'Wills, Field book, 22 Nov 1860 – 14 Feb 1861, Box 2083/1c,' and 'Field notes, 15 Feb – 24 Apr 1861, Box 2082/6k,' are actually the work of William Brahe.
44. Wills, 'Last notes', 30 May 1861, Safe 1, SLV.
45. *Argus*, 28 Dec 1861, p. 5.
46. *Argus*, [dispatch from an *Argus* correspondent . . .], 3 Nov 1861, Box 2082/1d (1).
47. EC, Minute books, Box 2088B/1, p. 101; *Age*, 5 Nov 1861, p. 5.
48. *Argus*, 6 Nov 1861, p. 5.
49. EC Minute books, Box 2088B/1, p.160 and Box 2075/3b, 29 Nov 1861; *Age*, 30 Nov 1861, p. 4.
50. *Argus*, 1 Sep 1863, p. 6.
51. *Argus*, 30 July 1863, p. 5.
52. EC, Minute books, Box 2088B/1, p.269; *Argus*, 12 Aug 1863, p. 6; 13 Aug 1863, p. 4.
53. James Smith, 'John King's story,' *Australasian*, 7 May 1870, p. 58; 14 May, p. 614; 21 May, p. 648.
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Endnotes

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Available on-line at: <http://www3.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-58/t1-g-t4.html>.
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  56. *Argus*, 7 Nov 1861, p. 5.
  57. Mueller, Transcription of Wills' 'Journey from Coopers Creek to Carpentaria', 5 Nov 1861, Box 2083/1a.
  58. Joseph Stewart Weatherston, Unpublished manuscript and papers, c.1940-4, MS 295/2, NLA.
  59. EC, correspondence between Mueller and Dickson, 28-30 Jan 1862, Box 2078/3.
  60. Smith's transcription is not listed as a separate ms, but is included with Mueller's transcription at Box 2083/1a.
  61. Dept Crown Lands and Survey, Explorers 22, 5 Nov 1861, VPRS 8168/P1, Historic Plan Collection. PROV.
  62. 'Portion of diary kept by Robert O'Hara Burke', MS30/1 and William John Wills' journal of trip 'from Cooper Creek towards Adelaide', MS30/7, both at the National Library of Australia.
  63. James Smith, Papers, 1837-1909, ML MSS 212, Mitchell Collection, State Library of New South Wales. Entry for 1 Jan 1863.
  64. Royal Society of Victoria, *Supplementary Final Report of the Exploration Committee*, Melbourne: Mason and Firth, 1873.

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