

Charles Sturt (1786-1869)



Charting the Rivers

Charles Napier Sturt was born in British India, the second son of Thomas Lenox Napier Sturt, who became a judge in Bengal under the British East India Company. He was sent to England at the age of five to be educated and after attending a preparatory school was sent to Harrow in 1810. His father lacked the finances to send him to Cambridge his father to send him to Cambridge and an aunt made an appeal to one of the royal princes, probably the Prince Regent. While Sturt did not go to university on 9 September 1813 he was gazetted an ensign in the 39th (Dorsetshire) Regiment of Foot in the British Army, probably due to royal influence.

He served in the Pyrenees late in the Peninsular war, fought against the Americans in Canada and returned to Europe a few days after Waterloo. He spent the next three years with the army of occupation in France and in 1818 was sent with his regiment to Ireland on garrison duties. On 7 April 1823 he was gazetted lieutenant and promoted captain on 15 December 1825. In December 1826,

after a brief sojourn in England, he embarked with a detachment of his regiment in the *Mariner* in charge of convicts for New South Wales. They arrived in Sydney on 23 May 1827

Sturt had sailed with some prejudice against the colony but found the conditions and climate much better than he had expected. In fact his feelings completely changed, and he developed a great interest in the country. Soon after his arrival Sturt was appointed military secretary to the governor and Major of Brigade to the garrison. With these offices he could have taken an active part in politics, but preferred to be involved in exploration. By November 1827 he was able to write to his cousin, Isaac Wood, that the governor had agreed to his leading an expedition into the interior.

On 4 November 1828 Sturt received approval to proceed with his proposal to trace the course of the Macquarie River. Wisely, he selected as his assistant the native-born Hamilton Hume, who had already shared leadership of a major expedition to the south coast. Prudently he selected as his assistant the native-born Hamilton Hume, who had already shared leadership of a major expedition to the south coast. With three soldiers and eight convicts Sturt left Sydney on 10 November. Hume joined them at Bathurst and, after collecting equipment from the government station at Wellington Valley, they moved on 7 December to what became virtually the base camp at Mount Harris.

On 22 December the expedition started down the Macquarie through country blasted by drought and searing heat. Having unsuccessfully tried to use a light boat, Sturt and Hume began independent reconnaissances during which Hume established the limits of the Macquarie marshes and Sturt examined the country across the Bogan River. They then proceeded north along the Bogan and on 2 February came suddenly on "a noble river" flowing to the west. Sturt named it the Darling.

Unhappily its waters were undrinkable at that point because of salt springs. They followed the Darling downstream until 9 February, then returned to Mount Harris and from there traced the Castlereagh northward until it too joined the Darling. They then returned to Wellington Valley down the eastern side of the Macquarie marshes, having sketched in the main outlines of the northern river system and discovered the previously unknown Darling River. The expedition, however, had discovered no extensive good country. Although Sturt was ill on his return to Sydney he was scrupulous in recommending the convicts in his party for such indulgences as the colonial

government could grant. Darling granted some remissions of sentence and in his dispatches commended Sturt's patience and zeal.

The Darling River had offered a new challenge and Sturt soon sought permission to lead another expedition to trace the Darling to its assumed outlet in the inland sea. However, it was decided instead that he should investigate the Lachlan-Murrumbidgee river system discovered by Oxley and proceed to the Darling only if the Murrumbidgee proved impassable. (In his journal Sturt spelled Murrumbidgee Murrumbidgee.)

On 3 November 1829 the second expedition left Sydney. They moved through country which was partly settled until they reached Warby's station near Gundagai, then the limit of settlement, and set off into the unknown country. After many crossings of the Murrumbidgee to find suitable tracks for the drays they moved down the north bank of the river and on Christmas Day arrived at its junction with the Lachlan. The existence of several marshes led to them abandoning their previous plan to go to the Darling. Instead, since the Murrumbidgee was still fairly clear Sturt decided to use the whale-boat which he had brought with him and build a small skiff from local timber. On 7 January 1830 he set out with seven men in the two boats on the Murrumbidgee.

Apart from the complete loss of the skiff soon after embarkation the journey was uneventful until 14 January when the rapid current of the Murrumbidgee carried them to a "broad and noble river" which Sturt later named in honour of Sir George Murray, secretary of state for the colonies. Further down the Murray they had two threatening encounters with Aboriginals, and on 23 January came to a new large stream flowing in from the north. After rowing up it for a few miles Sturt was convinced that it was the Darling and returned to the Murray. An uneventful voyage brought them on 9 February to Lake Alexandrina whence they walked over the sandhills to the southern coast. They reached the channel where the lake entered the sea but found it impracticable for shipping.

Depressed by failing to find either an effective inland waterway or the ship which Darling had promised to send from Sydney, Sturt now faced the daunting prospect of rowing more than 900 miles (1448 km) against a strong current with his weary men and certain food shortage. They began the return journey on 12 February and on 23 March arrived at the Murrumbidgee depot only to find it deserted by the base party which had been left there. The starving crew struggled on until 11 April

when Sturt abandoned the boat and sent two men to seek the relief party which he believed to be near. A week later the two men returned with supplies and the exhausted expedition finally reached Sydney on 25 May. Although an interim account of the findings of the expedition had been published in the *Sydney Gazette* Governor Darling did not report to England until February 1831.

Meanwhile Sturt, after a short illness, had been sent to Norfolk Island as commandant of the garrison. On his return to Sydney it was proposed that he either be sent to New Zealand as Resident Governor or on another journey to the Darling. However his health was so poor that he was granted leave to return to England. On the voyage his eyesight, which had been damaged by the searing heat on his explorations, broke down, leaving him almost totally blind. Some crude medical treatment on his return to England improved his sight only slightly. After many petitions to the Colonial Office he was promised a grant of 5000 acres (2024 ha) in New South Wales on condition that he sold his commission and renounced all other rights arising from his military service. On 20 September 1834 he married Charlotte Greene.

Sturt sailed with his wife and arrived at Sydney in mid-1835. With intentions of settling down to country life he located his grant at Ginninderra (near Canberra) in June and in August bought 1950 acres (789 ha) at Mittagong, where he lived for two years. He was appointed a justice of the peace, became a passive member of the governing body of the Australian Museum, was recommended unsuccessfully for appointment to the Legislative Council. Early in 1837 he bought 1000 acres (405 ha) at Varroville between Liverpool and Campbelltown, where he established another home.

Early in 1838 financial difficulties forced him to sell his Mittagong property and prompted him to participate in a venture for overlanding cattle to South Australia. Although in the process he was able to add something to knowledge of the Murray River, the journey almost ended in disaster and the venture was a financial failure.

It is interesting to note that Sturt was an avid and accomplished ornithologist, and his journals contain many detailed observations and excellent watercolour sketches of the bird life he encountered on his journeys. Just prior to the 1838 journey, he had been visited in Adelaide by the noted natural historian John Gould, “who greatly admired Sturt's large original collection of Australian Psittacidae (parrots) in watercolour, for which he offered on the spot a large sum”, but Sturt would not part with

the portfolio at any price. The collection was later stolen together with early journals and diaries, losses which obsessed Sturt in his last years.



The Crested Pigeon of the Marshes (left) and The Rose Cockatoo, from: Charles Sturt's. *Two expeditions into the interior of southern Australia : during the years 1828,1829,1830, and 1831 : with observations on the soil, climate, and general resources of the colony of New South Wales*, published London. 1833. Courtesy of King's College, University of London

In Adelaide he had been invited to join the South Australian public service and on 8 November 1838 was formally offered the position of surveyor-general. Despite his lack of technical qualifications and some doubts about Governor Gawler's power to make the appointment, he accepted, sold his property in New South Wales and sailed with his family for Adelaide on 27 February 1839. At first all seemed to go well. The first shattering blow came in September when Lieutenant Frome arrived from London with a commission as surveyor-general. Gawler, in a loyal attempt to help Sturt, appointed him assistant commissioner of lands, though at a reduced salary. In November Sturt and his wife joined Gawler in what was intended to be a short excursion up the Murray valley. On his expedition a young man lost his life and the governor was placed in serious danger. Although Sturt was not responsible the tragedy affected him deeply.

In 1841 Sturt committed what was probably the most serious error of judgment of his life: When news arrived that Captain George Grey was to replace Gawler as governor, Sturt wrote to the Colonial Office complaining of Grey's youth and offering himself as an alternative candidate for vice-regal office. Grey, who could not tolerate opposition, never forgave him this clumsy affront.

From that time on Sturt's affairs worsened. Grey confirmed his provisional appointment as assistant commissioner, but later refused him the office of colonial secretary on the grounds that his sight was too poor. The Colonial Office then decided to abolish the assistant commissionership, leaving Sturt with the inferior post of registrar-general at a much lower salary. To a man of Sturt's temperament the situation was now intolerable. He was at loggerheads with the governor, deeply in debt, inadequately paid, and could see no hope of improving his prospects. He petitioned the Colonial Office for financial compensation or transfer to another colony. When this was refused he decided that the only course left to him was to establish by some bold stroke a claim on the government for special consideration. His best chance of doing this was in exploration and, since he still believed in the existence of an inland sea, he prepared a grandiose plan for exploring and surveying, within two years, the entire unknown interior of the continent, and in 1843 forwarded it to the Colonial Office through his old friend, Sir Ralph Darling. While waiting for a reply he and Grey had a series of minor clashes which culminated in Sturt's censure by the Executive Council for an incautious letter. In May 1844 the Secretary of State rejected Sturt's original plan but approved a more limited proposal to penetrate the centre of the continent in an attempt to establish the existence of a mountain range near latitude 28°S.

On 10 August 1844 Sturt left Adelaide with 15 men, 6 drays, a boat and 200 sheep. In eight days the party reached Moorundie and then followed the Murray River to its junction with the Darling, and up the Darling to the vicinity of Lake Cawndilla, where they camped for two months making several scouting expeditions into and beyond the Barrier Range. In December the party was short of water and some of the men showed signs of scurvy but they moved further north into the Grey Range. There they made a camp on permanent water fortunately found at Depot Glen on Preservation Creek. By that time summer heat had dried up all other water within reach and from 27 January 1845 to 16 July they were literally trapped in inhospitable country; men and equipment suffered terribly from the heat and Sturt's second-in-command, James Poole, died of scurvy.

In July they were released by heavy rain. Sturt moved his party in a north-westerly direction to Fort Grey, whence he made a series of reconnoitring expeditions culminating in a 450-mile (724 km) journey towards the centre of the continent. Repulsed by the sand dunes of the Simpson desert he at last reluctantly abandoned the idea of an inland sea.

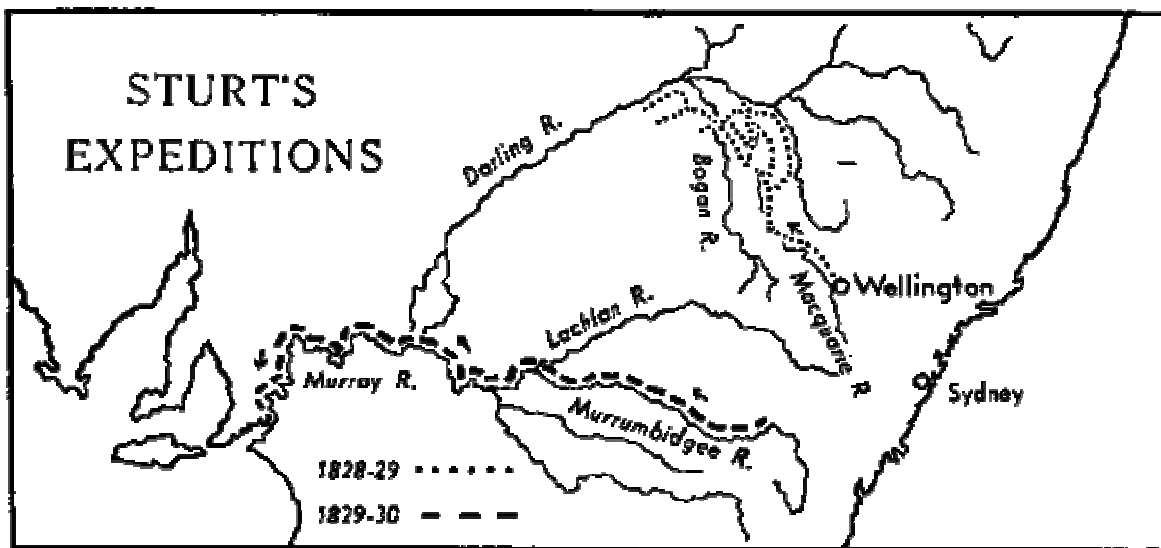
Sturt and his party returned exhausted to Fort Grey and after another trip to the Cooper's Creek area from 9 October to 17 November they found the waterhole was rapidly drying up. Return to the River Murray became imperative but nevertheless Sturt proposed that the main party should go home, while he and John McDouall Stuart made a do-or-die trip towards the centre. The surgeon, J. H. Browne, resisted so strongly that these heroics were dropped and the whole party went off together. At this point Sturt succumbed to a serious attack of scurvy and Browne took command. By using Aboriginal foods Sturt had almost recovered when the expedition reached Moorundie on 15 January. Sturt arrived in Adelaide on 19 January 1846.

In his absence Grey had been replaced by Major Robe and Sturt had been appointed Colonial Treasurer. His position was now more comfortable and early in 1847 he applied for leave. He left for England on 8 May and arrived in London just too late to receive in person the gold medal of the Royal Geographical Society, but was able to publish an account of the expedition. On his return to Adelaide in August 1849 he was immediately appointed colonial secretary but unfortunately his sight began to further deteriorate and at the end of 1851 he retired on a pension of £600 per year.

Sturt had often expressed his love for Australia and his determination never to return to England, but the need to secure the future of his children forced him to change his mind and he left Australia on 19 March 1853. He spent his last years peacefully at Cheltenham, widely respected and continually consulted about Australian affairs. In 1855 he applied unsuccessfully for the governorship of Victoria and of Queensland in 1858. In 1869, at the instigation of his friends, he sought a knighthood, but died on 16 June before the formalities were completed. Later the Queen permitted his widow to use the title Lady Sturt. However, he was pursued to the end by financial difficulties and it was said that had his old friend George Macleay not come forward, there would not have been enough in his estate for a decent burial when he died suddenly on 16th June 1869

Although Sturt probably entered his career as an explorer through influence, his selection was justified by results. He was a careful and accurate observer and an intelligent interpreter of what he saw, and it was unfortunate that much of his work revealed nothing but desolation.

Sturt prided himself with some justice on his impeccable treatment of the Aborigines, and earned the respect and liking of his men by his courtesy and care for their well-being. Indeed his capacity for arousing and retaining affection made him an ideal family man but a failure in public life. Without toughness and egocentricity to balance his poor judgment and business capacity he had little chance of success in colonial politics. In this sphere he might well be described as a born loser. He will, however, always be remembered as the first to chart the Murray River.



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T.V. programme:

"The Secret of the Rivers: Captain Charles Sturt"; (28 minutes) in the series *Peach's Explorers*.

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