

Australia ...



The Wide, Brown

Land For Me!

Sample Pages

Adnil Press

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Lesson 25

Burke and Wills

Supplies Needed for This Lesson:

Student Pages	Coloured Pencils, Crayons or Markers
Scissors & Glue	Reference Books
Equipment and ingredients for a 'cook out' (See part 5 in the 'Things to Do' section)	

One of the most famous, and most tragic, stories in Australia's history is that of Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills.

The Challenge

The colony of Victoria had grown immensely, and the people decided it was time to organise a great expedition – to cross Australia, and reach the Gulf of Carpentaria. They purchased supplies, even shipping out camels from India, chose particular horses, built special carts, and so forth. As an incentive, the Government of South Australia had offered a prize of £2,000 (about \$5,000) to the first expedition to cross the Australian continent from south to north.

'Robert O'Hara Burke' was chosen as the leader, an Irish inspector of police, who had been in Australia for only six years, and knew little about the Australian bush. An expert in camels, 'Landells' was selected as second-in-command, and 'William John Wills' was chosen as astronomer and surveyor.

The Journey Begins

The expedition consisted of fifteen white men, three Indian camel drivers, twenty-five camels, and twenty-eight horses. They left Melbourne amidst a cheering crowd in August, 1860. However, only a few days later, Landells and Burke quarrelled, and Landells returned to Melbourne.

At Menindie, on the Darling River, Burke split the party. He, with Wills and six men, pushed on to Cooper's Creek to establish a base camp, while the main party followed, bringing the heavy stores. When Burke arrived at Cooper's Creek, he built a stockade around the camp, and because it was the sixty-fifth stop since leaving Melbourne, carved 'LXV' on a tree with the date. They named the place 'Fort Wills'. They then waited for the main party to arrive.

After several weeks, however, Burke grew impatient, and decided to split the party again. He took with him three men – Wills, King and Gray, and decided to make a dash for the Gulf of Carpentaria. He put a man named Brahe in charge of the men at Cooper's Creek, and on December 16th, 1861, the small party set out into the unknown.

The Dig Tree

Brahe waited for four months at Cooper's Creek. The main party had not arrived. The stocks of food were depleting, and the natives were causing trouble. So, he buried some food at the foot of a tree, and carved on it the word 'DIG'. He also buried a letter explaining their departure, and dated it – 21st April 1861.

Burke Reaches the Sea

Meanwhile, Burke and his small party had travelled northwards for eight weeks, sometimes travelling more than 16 hours a day. Then, early in February, they reached the Little Bynoe River, an arm of the Flinders River delta. Swamps, however, blocked their final passage to the open sea. "We reached the sea but could not obtain a view of the open ocean," reported Burke. And so the glory had come – Burke and Wills were the first to cross Australia from south to north. However, their supplies were desperately low, and they knew they must return to Cooper's Creek.

The Return to Camp

On the trip south, however, Gray fell ill. Burke found him taking flour from the stock, and convinced he was faking the illness, Burke thrashed him. However, Gray was not faking, he was dying. On April 17th, he passed away. The other three spent a day digging a grave and burying him before continuing their journey. They reached the base camp on Sunday, 21st April, only to find it deserted. Feverishly they dug and found the provisions.

On reading the letter, the men realised that the party had only left camp on that same day – 21st April. In fact, it was only 7-9 hours beforehand that they had left. What were they to do? Wills and King wanted to follow Brahe. After all, he would only be a few miles away. Burke said they could not do it, and insisted on trying to reach the outlying cattle stations of South Australia. As usual, he overruled his men. Then began a terrible time of slow starvation. They started off down the creek. Burke left a letter explaining this, but sadly, he buried it in the hole where Brahe had put the provisions, and left no mark stating that he had done so.

Later, Brahe came back to the depot with relief, but found no sign that his leaders had returned. Of course, it did not occur to him to dig in the hole – why would it? Brahe hastened back to Melbourne to organise search parties.

Some weeks later, Burke sent Wills back to the camp to leave another letter. It was too late. Wills found the camp exactly as they had left it. Brahe of course had not left any marks, so Wills never knew that he had returned.

The Tragic Story Unfolds

The rest of the story is just plain tragedy. The men were dying. First, Wills went. He knew he was dying, and insisted the other men go on without him. They did so, but soon after, on June 28th, Burke died also. King staggered back to where they had left Wills, only to find him dead, with a note next to him, which read, "My legs and arms are nearly skin and bone. I am weaker than ever."

All through July, August and early September, King lived with the aborigines, who treated him kindly. On 13th September 1861 a relief expedition, under Alfred Howitt hurried into the depot at Cooper's Creek. Two days later, they found King lying in a native hut 'in scarecrow rags', as they described it. From him they learnt the sad story. Reverently, the bodies of Burke and Wills were collected and carried back to Melbourne for burial.

The expedition of Burke and Wills was costly – well over £50,000 (about \$125,000) - an immense sum compared to that furnished for the other explorers. However, Burke and Wills had done what they set out to accomplish – to cross the continent from south to north, and their names have earned a permanent place in the history of Australia.

Lesson 25 – Burke and Wills - Things to Do:

1. Trace the journey of Burke and Wills on the map of the following page.
2. Re-tell the story in your own words, writing a summary in your notebook.

Add the map, and perhaps find (or draw) some illustrations as well.

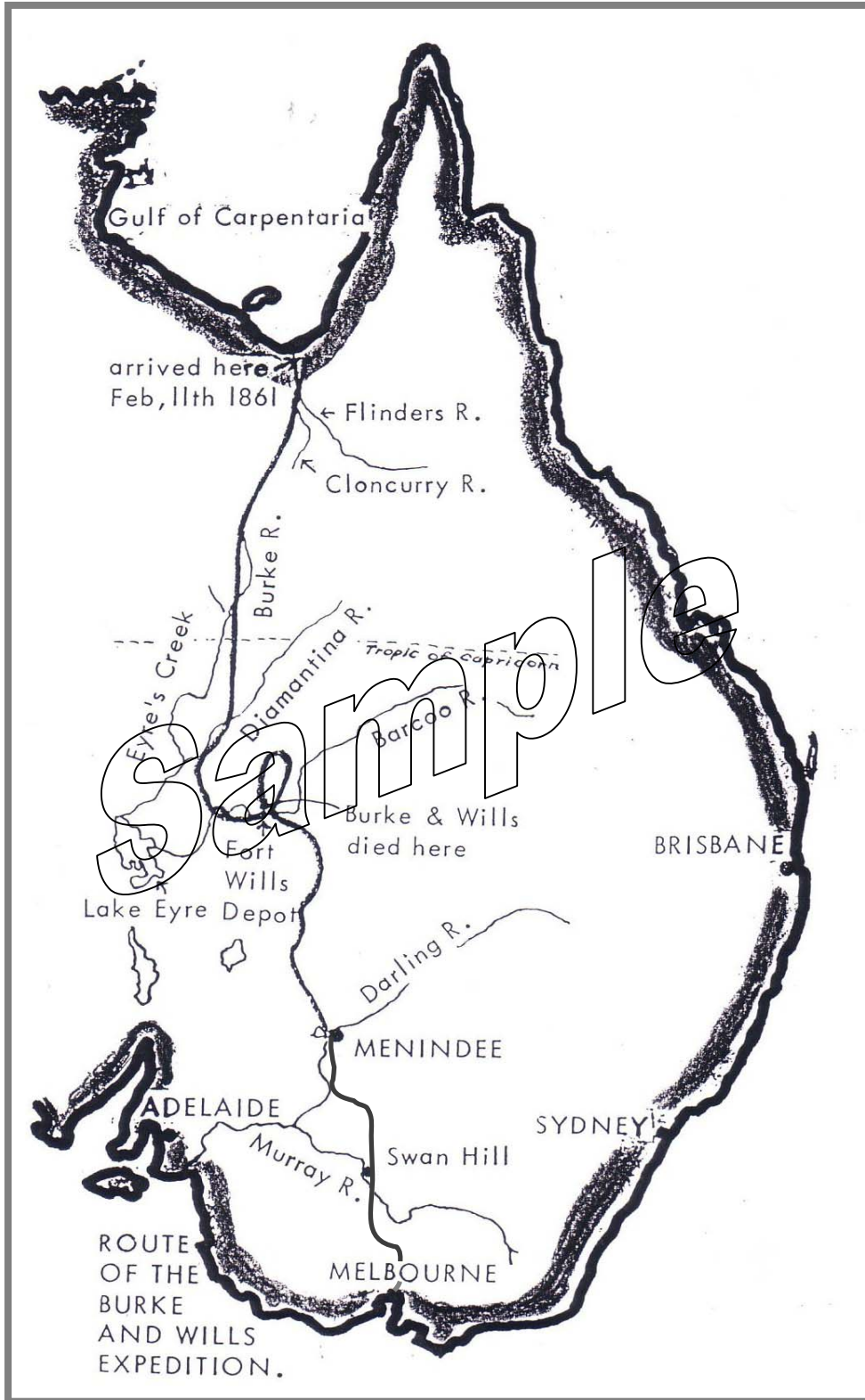
3. Talk about some of the tragic events that led up to the death of Burke and Wills – what might have happened if they arrived back at Cooper’s Creek one day earlier? What if they had marked the camp so that Brahe knew to dig for their letter? And what if Brahe had left a horse, or a camel, at the camp for the explorers?
4. Complete the word search included at the end of this chapter.
5. Pretend you are explorers in the Australian outback!

If the weather is nice (and it’s not fire season), make a camp fire in your back yard. Perhaps you could cook some damper in the coals (see lesson 13 for the recipe), and boil some ‘billy tea’. To cook the damper in the coals, simply follow the recipe, then using a strong stick, dig a hole in the coals. Bury the damper and cover with the coals again, and leave for approximately 30 minutes. (If you wish you can wrap the damper in aluminium foil first – leave it loose though, so the dough can rise!)

To make the billy tea, drag some coals out of the fire and put the billy on (a tin with a handle – you can make your own, or buy one). When boiling, throw in about a teaspoon of tea for each person, and as is tradition, one for the pot’. Leave for a minute or two, and then use a forked stick to carefully take it off the coals (and adult doing this part would be best!).

Now, they ‘say’ that to sink the tea leaves to the bottom, and therefore have a much nicer cup of tea, you should grab the handle with a cloth or hat and quickly swing the billy can three times around in a full circle from your ears to your knees. However, with children around, I’d simply suggest you let it sit for a few minutes – much, much safer! Finally, add milk and sugar as you wish (although to be more authentic, one would drink it black), and enjoy!

Of course, if it’s all a bit much, simply toast some marshmallows! Find a long stick, place a marshmallow on the end, and hold over the coals for a few seconds. Sit around the fire and enjoy spending time with, and telling some stories to, each other. You could also use the time to review the section on the exploration of Australia. But the most important part of all is to have fun!



Exploration

L E G T B A R Z A Y F N A H G E H S
F B I N Z J A L N I W Y L I E E F L
A L L E T A V L S O B N V G N G R L
I G Z A L J O Q F Z A Z A H S D H I
R C K O X L A Z L R S W D R U I X W
A S D A R L I N G P S S A E C B R S
T N K M K V A Z V V H Q B O Y M N I
N I W K C U U N S T Q S O P G U T H
E A R E L B U M D R T P V K Z R E X
P T G K R A D T U U E I R G E R G H
R N R R A X I G A R N D P L Q U U X
A U N U W T G R S X R N N S B M V S
C O I B Y E T C S B H A T I E S D I
E M N M A R R U J K L U Y K L O V O
Y E D X G E Q K B N R Q Y Q T F X U
R U T N E U D G P T S H N T J L Z O
E L Z K F Y A V T V A W T I E K W N
L B Q O J G D I Y W H Z N Y A F Y H

BASS

BAXTER

BLAXLAND

BLUE MOUNTAINS

BURKE

CARPENTARIA

COOPERS CREEK

DARLING

DIG

EYRE

FLINDERS

GHAN

HUME

MURRAY

MURRUMBIDGEE

OXLEY

STUART

STURT

WILLS

WYLIE