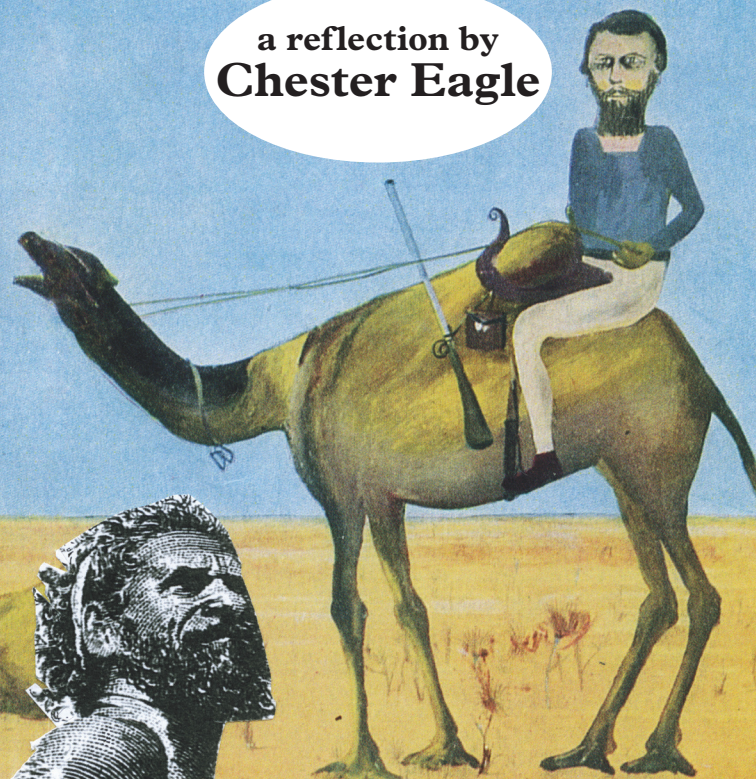


ALAN MOOREHEAD
**COOPER'S
CREEK**

a reflection by
Chester Eagle



Books by Chester Eagle

Hail and Farewell! An evocation of Gippsland (non-fiction, 1971)

Who could love the nightingale? (novel, 1974)

Four faces, wobbly mirror (novel, 1976)

At the window (novella, 1984)

The garden gate (novel, 1984)

Mapping the paddocks (non-fiction, 1985)

Play together, dark blue twenty (non-fiction, 1986)

House of trees (reissue of *Hail and Farewell!* 1987)

Victoria Challis (novel, 1991)

House of music (stories, 1996)

Wainwrights' mountain (novel, 1997)

Waking into dream (novel, 1998)

didgeridoo (stories, 1999)

Janus (travel pieces, 2001)

The Centre & other essays (essays, 2002)

Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (librettos, 2003)

Melba: an Australian city (essays, 2004)

The Wainwright Operas (librettos, 2005)

Oztralia (essays, 2005)

Cloud of knowing (novel, 2006)

Benedictus (essays, 2006)

Central Station Sydney & other operas (librettos, 2006)

The Sun King & other operas (librettos, 2007)

The Well in the Shadow (literary essays, 2008)

All the Way to Z (memoir/essay, 2009)

This Enchanted World & other operas (librettos, 2009)

Running The Race (novel, 2010)

A Mob Of Galahs & other operas (librettos, 2011)

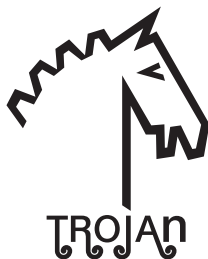
The Pilgrims (novel, 2012)

Swinging Doors (novel, 2013)

(See also mini-mags over the next page.)

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Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)

Hallucination before departure (memoir, 2006)

Mozart (memoir, 2007)

Travers (memoir, 2007)

The Saints In Glory (story, 1991/2009)

So Bitter Was My Heart (memoir, 2008)

Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)

Who? (memoir, 2008)

At Baldy's Feet (memoir, 2008)

Othello's Rage (memoir, 2009)

One Small Step (memoir, 2011)

Castle Hill (memoir, 2011)

Chartres (memoir, 2011)

The Plains (memoir, 2011)

Four Last Songs (memoir, 2011)

The Camera Sees ... (memoir, 2011)

Freedom (a reflection, 2011)

Men In White (a reflection, 2011)

An Airline Suite (story, 1989/2013)

Cooper's Creek (a reflection, 2013)

An Opera Suite (story, 1990/2013)

Changing our minds can be easy, can be hard: some people, many of them political, manage it without a blush! It's much harder for a nation, a whole continent full of minds, to change because of the complexity of processes necessary before a nation can be said to have adopted an idea: dis-adoptions, rejections or abandonments all take years and since there are usually quite a few believers left behind, ideas on the way out are rarely given any formal discharge. They're more likely to be neglected or simply left out of reckoning until they're forgotten. It saves a lot of energy to let an idea fade, or wither, rather than try to extinguish it by argument, because there will always be people willing to fight to maintain its currency.

These thoughts are in my mind because I've recently re-read a book published half a century ago, *Cooper's Creek* by Alan Moorehead, (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1963). It tells the story of the Burke & Wills expedition which set off from Royal Park, Melbourne on August 20, 1860, with the aim of crossing the continent from south to north and, presumably, returning north-south, although the expedition's overseeing committee gave its leader, Robert O'Hara Burke, a smorgasbord of routes and places that could be the focus of his venture. He was given various things to do but if the party ran into difficulties they might pursue alternatives, the most extraordinary being to take themselves to the Murchison River in Western Australia, some way north of modern Geraldton. Quite a trip! Moorehead is a fine writer and he is well aware of Burke's limitations as a leader and the defects in the conduct of the expedition, without, however, attempting

to show, as I hope to do, that the way we judge this expedition today needs radical revision.

The expedition was characterised in the way most of us understand it today almost as soon as a relief party, led by A.W.Howitt, an infinitely better bushman than Burke, found out what had happened. It had been more than unlucky, public opinion decided: it had been struck by fate. Burke and three others had left four men at a camp, modestly fortified, on Cooper's Creek in central Australia, and had headed for the Gulf of Carpentaria, far to the north. They got as close as mangrove swamps would allow, then turned back. Three of them managed to get to Cooper's Creek, while Charlie Gray died on April 17, 1861, four days before Burke, Wills and King reached the wooden stockade. They had spent a day burying Gray and when they got to the creek there was no one there: the four they'd left behind had decided, after weeks of indecision, to leave that morning. The camp was deserted but there was a message carved into a tree. Writing a century later, Alan Moorehead says this:

In the last hundred years the scene that night on Cooper's Creek has become something of a legend in Australian History, and it made a strong appeal to the illustrative artists of the day. Even as late as 1907 John Longstaff painted an enormous canvas showing the three haggard men grouped around the fatal tree, Burke in his tattered shirt and trousers staring dully into the distance, Wills

slumped on one of the camel packs, with bowed head and his hands on his knees, and King lying prone on the ground. The spade is flung down beside the opened cache, and in the background the two camels have sunk to their knees in utter exhaustion. The silent and unresponsive bush envelops them all. As a study of helpless despair it could hardly be improved upon.

The National Gallery of Victoria still possesses and sometimes displays this painting of men smitten by more than humans should be made to bear. It's a huge and sombre canvas, offering the viewer not the slightest relief from what fate has done. The three men are exhausted after making a prodigious effort to get back to the support, warmth and friendship they expected at the stockade, and there is nothing they can do to soften their situation. They are without hope. Indeed little else has sustained them since they left the stockade, months before. They battled through harsh and trying conditions until they entered the none-too-friendly tropics, and then they struggled back, suffering from exhaustion and the scurvy they, like many explorers and seafarers of the day, didn't understand, and their attitudes to their own sufferings and privations were foolish. Charlie Gray, whose death on the return journey I have already referred to, was thought to be 'gammoning', meaning pretending to be sick when he wasn't. (Charlie proved his companions wrong by dying!)

This painting has become famous because the artist has identified the explorers as subject to a tragic accident, the departure of the back-up group on the morning of the very day when they would be most needed, the moment when the party returning from the gulf would stagger in at almost the limit of their capacity to save themselves. I say ‘almost’ because after the initial shock of realising their situation they attempted to follow various branches of Cooper’s Creek down, as they hoped, to a police station at Mount Hopeless, somewhere to the south west. Alas, the creek dried out in harsh country offering no prospect of going on. They were alone and unsupported in a vast and forbidding terrain.

I should now pick up the point I made before about this story needing revision. Comparisons are said to be odious but the contrast between A.W.Howitt and Burke as bushmen and leaders shows Burke for the fool that he was. To see how swiftly and efficiently Howitt acted is to realise that most of Burke’s problems originated in his own mind. Moorehead describes the later party burying the remains of Wills; Howitt reads from 1st Corinthians over the grave: ‘O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?’ Noble thoughts, but the land had the first laugh, and the last. Wills had followed his leader and his leader hadn’t been up to the job. A second and more revealing comparison is between the white explorers, on the one hand, and the black people who’d lived on or near Cooper’s Creek for thousands of years.

I like to think, or perhaps I simply want to hope, that modern Australians would not be as ridiculous, arrogant

or just plain stupid as Burke and perhaps a number of our other explorers who had little respect for the earlier people, whom they called *primitive*, their superiority in their own eyes oozing out of the words they applied to the blacks. A moment's reflection might have caused them to notice the health, fitness and certainty of movement which was a feature of tribal life everywhere across the continent, including the fatal centre. The people whom Burke and his party looked upon as inferior moved freely, if carefully, across large areas of a landscape they knew well. It's almost amusing to read Moorehead's accounts of the contact between the two races because the whites, though not realising it, are clearly inferior. One might go so far as to say that 'the ghastly blank' (Moorehead's term) that the Burke & Wills party were exploring was not so much on the map as inside their own heads and that the emptiness of the terra nullius that they saw was a void in their own understanding.

The Burke & Wills party, like all Australian exploring parties, was moving through areas which were not empty at all. Such exploration was usually a prelude to settlers claiming ownership of places where there was an already existing scheme of ownership, except that, contrary to European ways, aboriginal people put ownership the other way around. It's commonly said, these days, that the people belonged to the land rather than the reverse; it's not possible, however, for us to verify that claim because most of the local languages have been wiped out and with them the systems of thought that they embodied. This is a terrible loss and one

that is only beginning to be understood as a loss today, when there are people doing their best to revive or reconstitute those languages where this is possible. Moorehead, were he writing today, might very reasonably call his first chapter 'The ghastly silence', or absence, meaning that the explorers, representative of the invading society, simply hadn't the mental receptivity to attend to, and then to grasp, at least the outlines of the civilisation, yes civilisation, upon which they were intruding.

Civilisations develop out of the places where they start. Australia is a dry, eroded continent, very different from Europe. The aboriginal people had been spread across it for thousands of years. How many? Estimates, these days, range between forty and sixty thousand. Dinosaurs lived here, and died out. The development of our country was interpreted by the aborigines in their stories. The new arrivals chose not to accept these understandings. The *terra* was declared to be *nullius*. A great mistake was being made. The settlers said the land had no history. Their ancestry led back to 1788 and thence to Europe. The black people, for their part, opposed the European notion of history with an idea of their own, which we refer to today as the dreaming (or Dreaming, or Alcheringa, or however else it has come down to us). Their sense of time was different from ours. Creation might have happened long ago (as in the Garden of Eden story, or the big bang theory if you prefer that one), but it was still happening. Past and present overlapped. There was a spirit world but it wasn't concentrated in one unified deity. Stories abounded

and sacred places were everywhere but there was no one holy book. The way of life of the black people was itself their law. There were fights but hardly litigation, because alternatives were few. What the Europeans saw when they looked at the aboriginal people – who took considerable care not to let the new arrivals see very far into their ways – showed almost none of the signs of what the Europeans believed was evolutionary progress. They were therefore primitive, and scorned as such.

This is a difficult line of thought to pursue. Religion, as practised in Christian Europe, had mankind close to God: by far the nearest of His creatures. This situation was disturbed by the theory of evolution, generally attributed to Charles Darwin. One of the attractions of Darwin's formulation was that it explained the enormous diversity of creatures in general, while retaining, perhaps even justifying, mankind's position at the top of the hierarchy. Evolution, as understood by the European mind, led *up!* Here is Ernest Giles, another who travelled through some of our country's hardest places a decade and a half after Burke:

But the great Designer of the universe, in long past periods of creation, permitted a fiat to be recorded, that the beings whom it was His pleasure in the first instance to place amid these lovely scenes, must eventually be swept from the face of the earth by others more intellectual, more dearly beloved and gifted than they. Progressive improvement is undoubtedly the order of creation, and we perhaps

in our turn may be as ruthlessly driven from the face of the earth by another race of yet unknown beings, of an order infinitely higher, infinitely more beloved, than we.¹

Progress, according to Giles, hadn't ended, but for the moment Australia's white settlers were top dog! I've quoted Giles in an attempt to explain what seems, today, to be an unforgivably stupid approach by the early explorers. Why could they not see that the places they were looking at were already in experienced hands? Why for instance, could they not take notice of the aboriginal peoples' customs for entering the country of another group? This was simple, and showed clearly the power relations involved. The visitor came within sight of the people on whose land he was intruding, and sat down, facing away from the people who could see him. Then he waited until someone from the locality came to him, inquired, and, all being well, invited him to join the group. The visitor delivered his messages, or asked permission to pass through their land until he reached country managed by others, when he went through the same procedures until he got to where he was going.

I'm not sure what you will make of this but I think you will see that it was a far cry from the triumphal progress of the Burke & Wills party in the weeks when they were two lines, camels and horses, kept well apart as they marched through Victoria, an area where the blacks were already in submission. It is not clear to me that they were any more

respectful in their four-man dash from the centre to the gulf. Travelling north, and travelling back again, they were conquering, in much the same way as Englishmen set out to conquer, in another country and another time, the highest mountains in the world, where Nepalese and/or Tibetans saw nature in ways that weren't the same as the Europeans brought with them and expected to be able to apply.

It is also plain from Moorehead's account that Burke was not interested in discovery per se; at Menindie he left most of his party with no particular scientific instructions, took seven men with him to Cooper's Creek, left four of them behind with instructions which were not as clear as they might have been, and headed north again, adventuring. He was aiming to do something that had never been done before, and he wanted to be first. Again, the men he left at the creek had a useless and frustrating existence, waiting for the gulf party to get back. The expedition appears to have learned next to nothing about the people whose land they were traversing. It made no systematic study of soil, plants, bird or animal life, nor, until those last desperate weeks when King was kept alive by the blacks who'd finally accepted responsibility for him, was anyone in the party curious about how the black people not only survived but appeared to prosper in this challenging country. Burke didn't keep a journal! Had he no thoughts worth writing down? It speaks volumes about his backers in Melbourne, the people who funded his expedition and gave it a hearty send-off in Royal Park, that they hadn't written arrangements into his instructions for the writing

and eventual publication of the leader's journal. Other explorers – Giles, Sturt, Mitchell, et al – wrote fascinating accounts well worth reading today: Burke put pencil to paper for only a few scrappy notes. This is more than personal failure, though it was certainly that: it was a failure of the expedition's backers, its committee, and the newspaper people of the colony who should have made it clear before the leader left that something thorough was required. Being first to the gulf was not in itself worthwhile knowledge. Perhaps the most grievous deficiency in the party's activities was their failure to make any study of the aboriginal languages they encountered; this could only be a result of the immense scorn European people felt for humans with black skins. One can only say of the expedition's members and also of the society that sent them out that their sense of superiority was as monumental as their ignorance.

Ignorance is not necessarily dangerous. Coupled with curiosity and a dash of humility, it can take us a long way. The ignorance of 1860 Melbourne, supported by the cheerfully accepted prosperity of gold, was prodigious. There are many sides to everything, and the ignorant confidence of *that* Melbourne can be seen in the fine homes and public buildings erected in the period. Its failings, its limitations, are made more obvious when we see things that have gone wrong and not been properly understood, then or since.

Societies don't find it easy to admit mistakes. Sometimes, as in Germany after World War 2, they are forced to admit wrongs. Evils, mistakes, always have a past, perhaps not

easily traceable. The moments, the policies, which led to later disasters, may not be obvious, or simple. Things rarely are. Yet I have started to ask myself questions about this famous expedition launched by the Royal Society's Victorian branch and it seems to me that, unwittingly perhaps, the Society took steps along paths, appealing to them, that they might better have avoided. Baron von Mueller, for instance, one of the great men of his day, gave Burke's party a variety of 'useful' plants to put in the soil in places where they set up reasonably lasting camp. Whether or not the expedition took with them the notorious blackberries which he was fond of promoting, I cannot say, but von Mueller was a member of Victoria's Acclimatisation Society which was bent on 'improving' the flora and fauna of its new land. It's hard to imagine any of Mueller's plants surviving for long at Cooper's Creek, but he and his fellow acclimatisers began a tradition which is still producing results today: I have in mind the thoughtless people who added European carp to the Murray-Darling waters, and those 'sportsmen' who thought that eastern Australia's mountains would be better for having deer. Other improvements added to our land include prickly pear, rabbits, foxes (ah, the English hunt!), cats, the cane toad and no doubt many more. Who brought them here? When? Why?

To this list of unwise additions to an environment of some delicacy we must also add the early – and not so early – settlers' habit of clearing more than was necessary: topping this list must be the mountain ash forests of central and south Gippsland. Patches of this wondrous forest can still be

seen in small 'national' parks surrounded by farmland. The value of these *Eucalyptus regnans* trees seems not to have been recognised, setting them apart from the cedar forests of central and northern New South Wales, long since felled and rarely regrown. Mountain ash, now prized as Australia's finest, and finest-grained timber, was cleared to make room for farming, an economic decision which changing values have reversed. They were sometimes ringbarked, which involved later clearing, possibly by fire, or they could be cleared by the spectacularly awful method of cutting a scarf in the downhill side of every tree on a mountain slope, and then felling, as quickly as possible, a few trees at the top. They, when falling toward the valley floor, crashed into the trees nearest them which, in turn and when falling, crashed into further trees bringing them down and 'clearing' whole hillsides at a time. Photos exist of this destruction. The trees were burned, not used, and their replacement was at best moderately viable farmland, at worst, country soon reclaimed by bracken fern and other detritus, a poor replacement for one of the noblest forests on the planet.

I realise that mistakes are certain to be made in settling a new country, but my reason for talking about Cooper's Creek is to make it clear that the lessons learned from the disaster are still obscured by the way it is understood. Concentration on tragedy is really no more than a vast and self-indulgent avoidance of realistic appraisal. It is simpler and more productive to see how the limitations of the Burke & Wills expedition were eventually overcome. Moorehead's book, in

referring to the exploratory work of John McDouall Stuart, gives a cartoon from the Melbourne Punch showing Stuart (on a horse) and Burke (on a camel) at full gallop above a heading 'The Great Australian Exploration Race'. This foolish idea of a race appears to have been active in the minds of both Burke and some members of the committee that chose him. If one accepts that a race was taking place, what was the goal and where the finishing line? How to judge? Burke, Wills, King and Gray got to the Gulf of Carpentaria (or near enough), but the activities of Stuart's expedition, somewhat to the west of the Burke party's line, led to the creation of the Overland Telegraph Line from Adelaide to Darwin and thence, by undersea cable, to London, world capital at the time. Creation of the telegraph line, and then its operation and maintenance, led to a number of repeater stations being built and staffed on a permanent basis by people who couldn't fail to make contact with surrounding aborigines. Mining and cattle ventures followed, bringing an influx of whites with the inevitable disruption to aboriginal life. One is tempted to see this as a further disaster, for all the benefits of the telegraph line, except that it also brought a properly scientific expedition to the area, the Horn expedition of 1894, which included Baldwin Spencer, professor of biology at the University of Melbourne, who formed friendships with a number of inland Australians, notably Frank Gillen. Gillen's letters to Spencer have survived² and show a remarkably sympathetic partnership between two men working and thinking very hard as they tried to understand

the ways of aboriginal people. Their *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (Macmillan, London, 1899) was the first of four joint publications (for details, see *From The Frontier: Outback Letters to Baldwin Spencer*, by Mulvaney, Petch and Morphy, published Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000).

What then is our verdict on Burke & Wills, their aims, their hopes and failure? Or is this too simple? Am I falling into a good guys/bad guys trap by making such a clear contrast between the expedition we remember for the Dig Tree and the Longstaff painting, not to speak of the loopy pile of bluestone in Royal Park, Melbourne, which marks their setting off point, and the far more acceptable efforts of Spencer, Gillen and others to understand the people of the centre?

This is a problem that presents itself on every colonial frontier. The virtue or otherwise of missionaries is the classic example, and in the case of central Australia, this question presents itself at places like Hermannsburg where Pastor Strehlow and others cared for the blacks, and shared the hardships of their existence at the same time as they refused to allow the life-organising practices of the Arrernte people to be practised on mission grounds. It might be argued, in the case of the missionaries, that in loving the black people they were destroying them, damaging them, every bit as effectively as the men of the cattle stations who'd taken control of the land by pushing the blacks out. Spencer and Gillen, then?

Anthropologists?

Anthropology is a field of study that established itself as a scientific discipline at roughly the same time as Freudian

psychology, giving us a contrast between the inner workings of the human personality and the variety of forms created by and for humanity's social life. It purports to be a science, that is to say it posits an objective observer looking at an object of study. Is it possible to study/consider human beings in this way? The easy answer is to say yes, but as one looks more closely considerable difficulties can be seen. Most people would prefer to be the observer rather than the object of study. Those who finish up being studied are likely to resent it and may do much to ensure that the project fails. Scientists can't do much if the other party, whom they are both studying and dominating, refuses to cooperate or perhaps deliberately confuses the science being used by outsmarting it. (Both are likely and possible!) Consider a situation where human group A is 'studying' human group B: there is an innate assumption of group A's superiority, is there not?

Now let us test anthropology in another way. Is it really as scientific as it tries to be? Let us imagine a real situation: group A are Europeans with an evolutionary mindset, while group B are a sophisticated people whose qualities, and previous history are not known by those of group A. I say 'sophisticated'; both groups are sophisticated, but in different ways, so each claims superiority over the other, but if asked to demonstrate their superiority they can only offer the characteristics they themselves value in their own culture. In other words, group A can only claim to be superior, more objectively scientific and so on, by asserting the greater validity of their schemes of thinking: in other words, again,

they say they are better judges because they believe they are better judges. And if the people in group B insist that they are better judges, then the people in group A can only respond by laughter, scorn, or complete puzzlement.

If you want to differentiate between the qualities of two groups, two whole societies, you must have a standard, and it's not possible to find a standard that doesn't belong to an already existing group. Anthropology can't finally judge any group, any society, without borrowing the values and standards of one of the groups it has already studied, or, more likely, the standards which the group itself has given birth to.

This is a problem!

Let me add one further cause for question. Is anyone aware of any occasion in the history of anthropology when group A has wished to study group B and has put a proposition to them whereby the two groups will study each other at the same time? A will study B by the standards of A and B will study A by the standards of B? I ask again, has anyone ever heard of this being done?

Such things might be done to the mutual benefit of both parties but that's not the way things get done in this world. Spencer and Gillen, two dedicated anthropologists, fascinated by the people they were studying and genuinely devoted to protecting them from the destructive intrusions of the whitefella civilisation they themselves represented, couldn't solve that problem!

It's a problem that can't be solved. Yet it is also impossible to imagine the Burke & Wills party, with its

camels, horses and heavyweight wagons making its way through the country in the respectful way of the black people, previously described. It wasn't the way of an empire which gloried in itself. The empire is gone but it may be said that modern Australia is one of its outcomes. What can we say then about the Burke & Wills expedition? The job of burying its two leaders fell to Howitt and his relief party. Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills were wrapped in Union Jacks and buried in the earth of a country they would have told you they had set out to understand. Charlie Gray was already there; did anyone go looking for him? John King, confused and distressed, was taken back to Melbourne. A statue to commemorate the explorers was commissioned, installed in the middle of a major intersection, and has been moving around Melbourne ever since. They're restless spirits, those unfortunate men. I don't think it's going too far to say that the city that sent them off has never quite known what to do with them, now that responsibility for them has come back.

Melbourne sent them on their way. If ideas circulating in their own time had been followed, they might have reached the inland by travelling west from Brisbane, or north-east from Adelaide, via the Mount Hopeless settlements they never saw, though they tried to save themselves by reaching them. They might also have done much the same job by taking a boat to the Gulf of Carpentaria and travelling south. That might have been easier. But they failed, or they succeeded if that's how you like to call it, by doing what they

did. See Moorehead's book for an excellent account: what can we say about them today? I think that all we can do is to add them to that list I offered earlier, of failures – prickly pear, foxes, rabbits, and the wrecking of forests we would love to have, today. It's only occasionally that heroic deeds are any use. In wartime, perhaps; but in gaining understanding? Only once in a while.

It would seem then that by now I have erased most of the fame that's been accorded them in the century and a half since Burke's party, much reduced, got back from the Gulf, believing themselves successful, and found the deserted camp. Getting them out of mind is not, however, quite so easy. Let me tell you something that happened many years ago, when I was a young teacher working in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. One of my colleagues organised a series of lectures and activities for our year eleven students. They were a numerous group and special timetabling had to be arranged to get them all together at the one place and time. This was done, and one of our first speakers was a man from the State Library of Victoria. He asked us to set up a long trestle table in front of his microphone so that he could show the things that he was talking about – some of the 'treasures', as he called them, of the library's collection. He spoke to an interested audience and, on finishing, he invited them to look at the treasures for themselves. It was an opportunity they would rarely get. They came to the table and looked through the things he had brought. Nobody would have called the Preston students culturally

literate but they were interested, so well had he spoken. Eventually, conscious of their later classes, most of the students drifted away, but a few hung on to talk to someone they'd found fascinating. Our visitor picked up his books and put them in boxes while he chatted. The teacher who'd invited him had to leave so I remained, tidying, until our visitor was ready to go. I noticed that there was a piece of paper near the microphone he'd used. Assuming it was a page of speaking notes, I picked it up. It was something more than I'd expected, indeed it was something I had never dreamed I would hold in my hands.

It was a page from William John Wills' diary, written in those last weeks when the three men, Burke, Wills and King, were trying to find a way out of their situation and finding that they couldn't. I no longer remember the exact words I read in Wills' hand, probably because I've read Moorehead's book too closely and too many times, but the writing I remember well - in pencil, clearly formed, showing no sign of the trouble they were in. Moorehead again:

Wills had also written a last letter to his father, and it is astonishing now to examine this document; there is not a word misspelt, hardly a comma forgotten, or a fault in grammar or style. The firm, thin, sloping handwriting is wonderfully clear, and this trained, pragmatical mind holds on to the very end. He is full of grievance and self-justification, but it is genuine pathos rather than self-pity that comes through,

and perhaps here we have a case of a limited man breaking through his bonds and becoming greater than himself at last.

The letter reads:

Cooper's Creek

Jun 27th 1861

My dear Father,

These are probably the last lines you will ever get from me ...

This was not the page that I picked up near the microphone but it was in the same hand, and made the same connection. Wills had written on this paper and I had it in my hand. Wills had died soon after, and I had years to live. He was an Englishman and I was not; I was already older than he was when he died; I'd read Moorehead's book and knew what had happened to Wills, though he died without knowing anything of me. There was no connection between us, except that he was a story now and I knew it; more than that, his story was a true story, it had actually happened. I had a page of his diary in my hand. His passion and his wretchedness were there, on that page I held. As I held it, the connection was direct. There was no denying it, then or ever. If you ask me what the city's councillors should do with their Burke and Wills statue, I would urge them to cart it to Cooper's Creek and set it up five hundred metres from the Dig Tree, facing, so that foolishness could gaze upon itself, and learn, at last. But Wills' diary? That's easy. It should remain in the State

Library forever, reminding us how foolish mankind can be. It's a lesson mankind needs to learn, and does learn, over and over again.

1. *Australia Twice Traversed: The romance of exploration, being a narrative compiled from the journals of five exploring expeditions into and through Central South Australia, and Western Australia, from 1872 to 1876*, Ernest Giles, London 1889, reprinted by the Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964
2. *My Dear Spencer: The Letters of F. J. Gillen to Baldwin Spencer*, edited John Mulvaney, Howard Morphy and Alison Petch, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1997

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