

# The Triumph of EDWARD JOHN EYRE

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD STOKES

*The horrors of my situation glared upon me with such startling reality, as for an instant almost to paralyse the mind. At the dead hour of night, in the wildest and most inhospitable wastes of Australia... I was left with a single native whose fidelity I could not rely upon...*

*Wind-driven dunes were a mixed blessing for explorer Edward Eyre as he pushed west through the desolate aridity around the Great Australian Bight in 1840-41; they exhausted his horses, but contained soaks of life-saving water. Nearly 150 years later writer Ed Stokes and his companions, following Eyre's route from Port Lincoln in South Australia to Albany in Western Australia, found little changed in this wild and sparsely populated region.*

**T**HE EXPLORER Edward John Eyre was writing about the shooting of his sole European companion, John Baxter, by one of his party's three Aborigines on the night of 29 April 1841. Baxter, his gaunt features etched by moonlight in the chill wind that swept through the stunted scrub, died in Eyre's arms. Agonised, Eyre was now alone with the third Aborigine, Wylie.

Eyre's 1800-kilometre journey around the Great Australian Bight from Port Lincoln to Albany was perhaps the most remarkable feat

of endurance in the exploration of Australia. Tracing his expedition for AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC, I was awed by the wild, unpeopled southern coast. Virtually unsettled even today, in 1841 it was utterly remote. As I camped along the Bight's western coast near the monument recording Baxter's death, the account of the shooting came vividly to mind. Time and again while following in Eyre's footsteps I had wondered at the sheer loneliness of his journey, but the effect of Baxter's loss was impossible to comprehend fully.