

The Triumph of EDWARD JOHN EYRE

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD STOKES

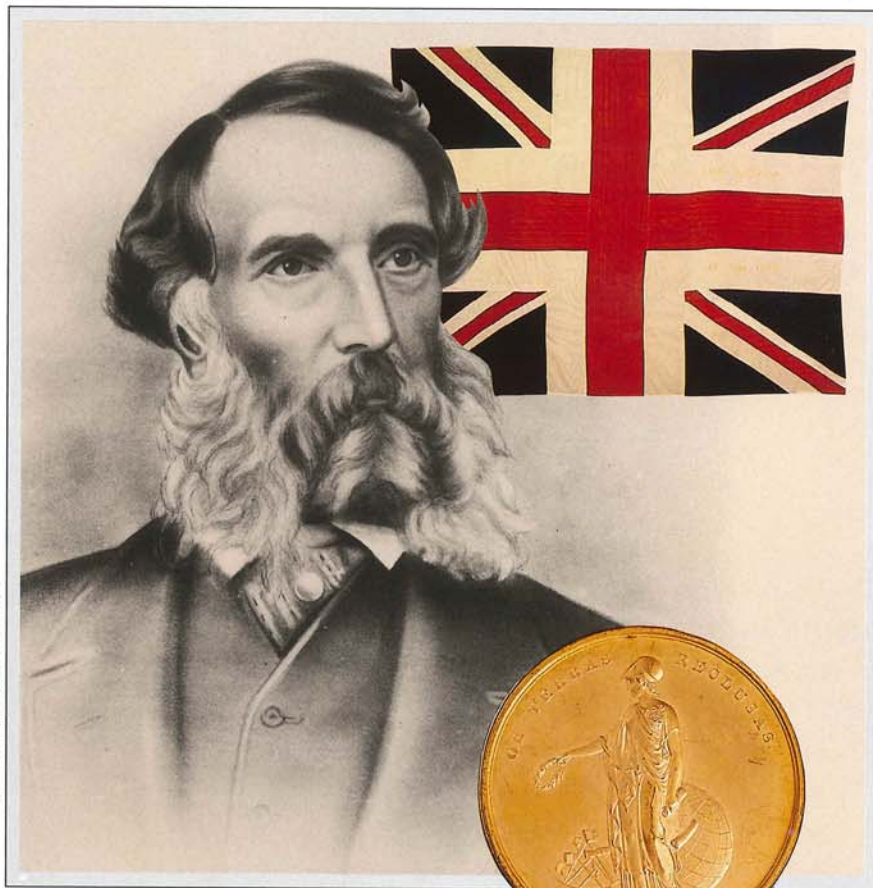
The horrors of my situation glared upon me with such startling reality, as for an instant almost to paralyse the mind. At the dead hour of night, in the wildest and most inhospitable wastes of Australia... I was left with a single native whose fidelity I could not rely upon...

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.

THE 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.



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Before leaving Adelaide on 18 June 1840 Eyre (left), who hoped to discover fertile country in central Australia, was given this Union Jack to plant there. North of the Flinders Ranges he was thwarted by waterless tracts like this sand ridge country (below) 40 km west of Leigh Creek. He decided to march west to search for an alternative route north, but never found one. Instead, after an arduous and heroic 1800 km journey, he became the first European to traverse the Bight by land, a feat that earned him the Royal Geographical Society's first medal for Australian exploration.

Eyre was 75 km beyond the last watering place and 140 km from the next. Their meagre provisions had been plundered by Baxter's half-starved assailants, who were now armed with the best guns. All they had left was 18 kilograms of flour, some tea and sugar and a mere 18 litres of water. Albany, Eyre's destination, still lay another 960 km to the south-west.

I first read Eyre's journals 20 years ago at Oxford, just 50 km away from Whipsnade in Bedfordshire, where he was born on 5 August 1815. Restless energy shaped the young Eyre's life, and when only 17, tall and strikingly handsome, he migrated alone to Sydney with his father's blessing and a sum of money. He took up farming in New South Wales, relinquishing his property early in 1837 to overland sheep and cattle to Port Phillip. One of his partners was the unfortunate Baxter. Eyre profitably overlanded stock from Sydney to the new settlement at Adelaide in 1837 and 1838 and settled in Adelaide. The following year

he explored the arid territory that would later be named Eyre Peninsula, and in 1840 made a voyage to King George Sound, Albany, with sheep and cattle, which he then overlanded to Perth.

Meanwhile, prominent South Australians anxious to promote further exploration had proposed an expedition to Western Australia. Eyre urged the organising committee to turn its attention to the north, as he thought it unlikely a useful stock route to the west existed. On the north coast, the Victoria River's mouth had been discovered and some believed it might connect with an inland sea. Funds were subscribed within weeks and on 18 June 1840, Eyre's expedition rode confidently northwards to probe the continent's heart.

Eyre reached the Flinders Ranges early in July and explored the region until mid-September. The salt lakes that appeared to him to ring the Flinders halted every major reconnaissance, and despairing of finding a route to central Australia, and

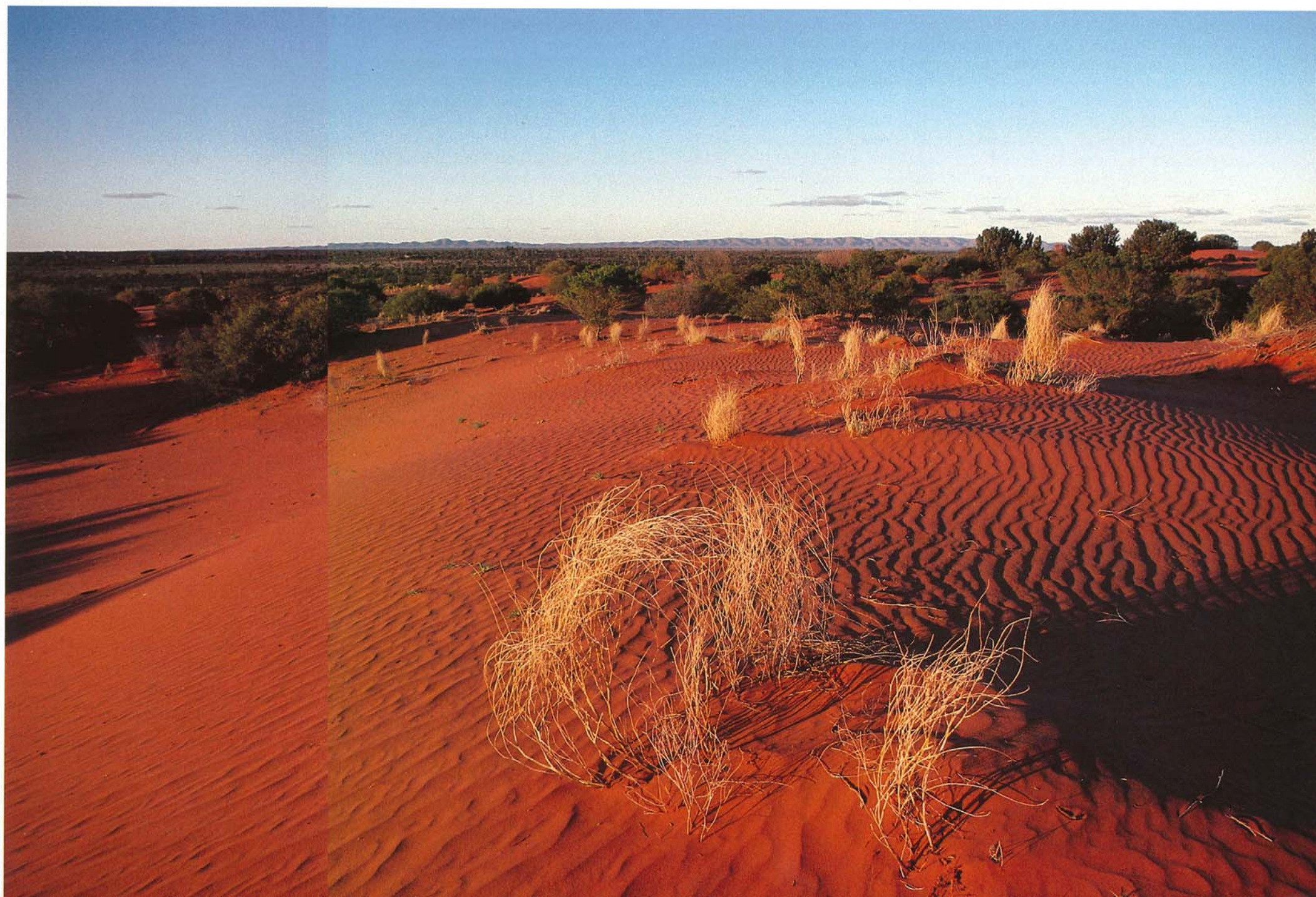
short of provisions, he retreated to his depot, now known as Depot Creek, near today's Port Augusta. But it was his next move in his search that led him to make his remarkable journey around the vast sweep of the Great Australian Bight to Albany – the heroic journey that earned him the first Royal Geographical Society Founders' gold medal awarded for Australian exploration, and a lasting place among the nation's explorers.

At Oxford, I was gripped by the story of Eyre's privations around the Bight. But I was also puzzled. If the lakes were an obstacle, why

hadn't Eyre managed to work around them and go north? And, having argued against seeking a route to Western Australia, why had he decided to go there? Most of all, what allowed Eyre to triumph over the Bight's arid wastes when he had been defeated by far easier country in the Flinders?

Sixteen years later, the outback gradually supplied me with answers when I embarked on my own journeys tracing the expeditions of Australia's inland explorers (*In Charles Sturt's Footsteps*, AG 7, and *John McDouall Stuart*, AG 11). During

my 1984 Sturt expedition I camped at Lake Blanche, only 40 km north of the point where Eyre retreated in September 1840. I recalled his bleak description of his surroundings, but more significantly the name he gave to a small hill there *before* reaching it: Mt Hopeless. By then Eyre had been two months in the Flinders, and his confidence had collapsed. It was understandable: just turned 25, he was the first European to witness the deathly silences of the depressed country beyond the Flinders. Its featureless sandhills and salt lakes baffled him.



My 1986 McDouall Stuart expedition prompted other thoughts on Eyre. Stuart had been schooled by 22 years in Australia including his 1844–46 experiences with Sturt in central Australia, and his 1860–62 discoveries were based on his intimate understanding of the outback's seemingly insignificant clues. Eyre, by comparison, was still dominated by his English roots. Although an excellent bushman for his time, he searched for major features – and when none eventuated he made assumptions. Having seen numerous lakes and reached Lake Torrens and Lake Eyre South at widely separated points and finally sighted Lake Frome's shimmering expanse, he concluded that the lakes were one and the same, forming a continuous "horseshoe" barrier.

He decided to push a significant distance either east or west from the "barrier", then attempt to work northwards into central Australia. The country to the east was partly explored, its Aborigines reputedly hostile and the route would take him away from the centre. He con-

cluded that westwards was "the least objectionable", and that once he reached the Bight "the country may perhaps alter its character so far as to enable me to prosecute the main object of the expedition, that of examining the Northern interior..."

And there may have been a deeper reason for his choice. Matthew Flinders had mapped the southern coastline in 1802, and his charts gave Eyre precise features to fix on. Unable to see over the Bight's towering cliffs, Flinders had wondered whether they might form "a narrow barrier between an interior, and the exterior sea". The speculation had not been disproved. Only a land explorer could do that. Having decided to push westwards, Eyre detoured to Port Lincoln on Eyre Peninsula for fresh supplies – and acquired a boat. This was to be used in conjunction with *Waterwitch*, a government cutter that had been put at his disposal, but – he recorded – the boat was for "coastal or inland explorations, should it be necessary".

Two of the questions posed at Oxford were answered, but not the

third. Defeated in the relatively well-watered country of the Flinders Ranges, how did Eyre battle 1800 km around one of the world's most arid and inhospitable coastlines? My own Eyre expedition, I hoped, would answer that.

I left Adelaide with two four-wheel-drive vehicles on 1 May 1988, aiming to reach some 50 sites along Eyre's route around the Bight. My co-drivers were Roz Forestal, 25, a family friend living in Hong Kong who was eager to experience outback Australia, and Sally Corry, 19, who had come from her family's

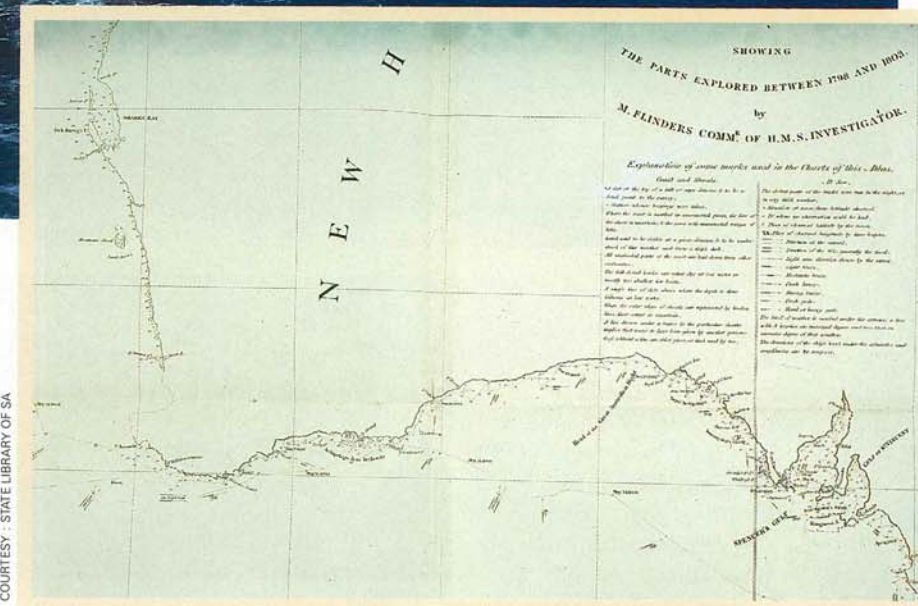
The eerie desolation of Lake Malata, a salt lake 60 km north-west of Port Lincoln, foreshadowed the waterless conditions that would dog Eyre for much of his westward journey. After retreating from the Flinders Ranges, he had detoured south-west down the Eyre Peninsula to Port Lincoln where he waited two weeks for supplies before heading up the peninsula's west coast to rejoin his main party at Streaky Bay.



DICK SMITH

The blank expanse on the map of south-western Australia (right) remained a mystery after Matthew Flinders charted the southern coast in 1802. His speculation that the Bight's cliffs (above) might hide an interior sea encouraged Eyre to journey westward in search of a watered route north, but on reaching the cliffs in January 1841 he discovered that they were the edge of a vast and virtually waterless limestone plateau.

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farm near Canberra, keen to refine her photographic skills in the field.

From Adelaide we drove to Port Lincoln, then followed Eyre's tracks up Eyre Peninsula's west coast to Streaky Bay. The coastline's dazzling sand drifts enthralled us, a foretaste of far larger formations around the Bight. Sweeping sand from the tent became a regular chore and keeping it out of our stores was often virtually impossible.

Having quit the Flinders Ranges and picked up supplies in Port Lincoln, Eyre reached Streaky Bay on 3 November 1840. There he per-

suaded a cheerful, elderly local Aborigine named Wilgudly to guide the party westwards via the Aborigines' coastal wells. With other Aborigines who attached themselves, the party left Streaky Bay for Fowlers Bay on 6 November. With Eyre were John Baxter, his overlanding companion since 1837, three other Europeans and two young NSW Aborigines who had travelled with him before – Neramberein and Cootachah, whom he called Joey and Yarry. The party had provisions, two drays and a cart, 13 horses and a small flock of sheep. More provisions were aboard *Water-*

witch, to be relayed farther up the coast. The daily stages across scrub-covered sandhills were exhausting, and the men cursed the drifting sand. However, every evening the Aborigines led the ponderous drays to wells that might easily have been missed among the coastal hummocks.

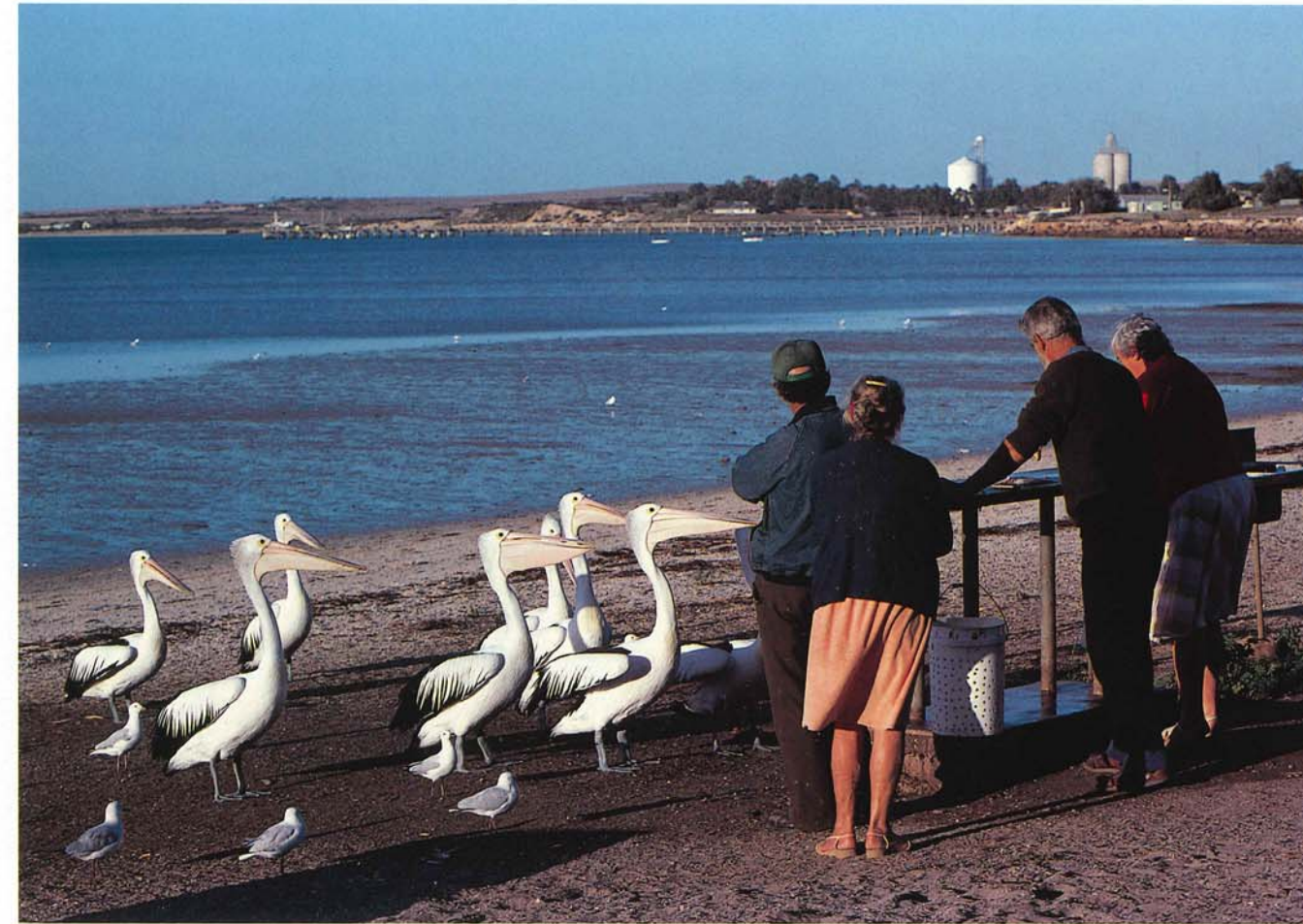
By 11 November the expedition was some 30 km west of Ceduna, camped near what is now Dudley Wright's 5000-hectare property, Woodlands. We met Dudley, 63, shepherding sheep along a dusty track to rest his worn-out paddocks – and there we yarned.



Charmed by Point Bell's dunes (above) and magnificent beaches, Ed Stokes and companions (right) Sally Corry, left, and Roz Forestal spent three days here, near where Eyre camped on 13 November 1840. Local Aborigines guided Eyre to their soaks hidden among the dunes, thus relieving his water shortage for the advance to Fowlers Bay.



Streaky Bay (opposite above) is one of the few safe all-weather deep-water anchorages between Port Lincoln and Albany. Wheat, grazing and fishing are the area's main industries. Boats like this shark catcher (opposite below) fish the Bight's waters, sometimes voyaging about 1700 km to Albany. Eyre rejoined his main party here on 3 November 1840.



Dudley explained that farmers still get fresh water among the coastal dunes. Rainwater percolating through the dunes into the soil below can be pumped out for watering stock – often only metres from heavily salted water. "But the fine sands we have here drift with the Bight's southerly winds," Dudley grimaced, his weather-beaten face still resilient. "It's nothing to go down one day and you have a well, but the next day you've lost it." Eyre, Dudley said, only needed water to keep him going, but it was a long way between permanent waterholes in that country, where the average

annual rainfall is just over 300 mm. Escorted by the cheerful Wilgully, Eyre reached the head of Fowlers Bay on 17 November and camped among sand ridges where today a forlorn scatter of houses make up South Australia's westernmost coastal settlement. The ease of their march to Fowlers Bay was due almost entirely to their Aboriginal guides. But although the heaviest supplies had been relayed along the coast in *Waterwitch*, the horses were already exhausted. With no harbours to the west, and the South Australian border terminating only 50 km west of Fowlers Bay at 132° longi-

tude, *Waterwitch* could go no farther – and nor might the Aborigines, Eyre realised. We reached Fowlers Bay two weeks after leaving Adelaide, by which time we had meshed into an effective team. Roz found joyful freedom in Australia's spaces, and indulged her passion for vegetarian food. Sally, exhilarated by the landscape's visual drama, made me find time for informal photography talks. Then, always her own person, she would wander off to photograph alone. As we revelled in the freedom that camping brings, we sometimes cursed my work, which required



almost daily moves to camp sites along Eyre's route.

I was generally up by dawn for photography, and by 9.30 we were on the move – often not reaching the next campsite until mid-afternoon. The remaining daylight hours were always rushed as I scouted for photographs before the light faded. We rarely pitched the tent before twilight, when diaries and cooking claimed us. But after dinner we relaxed around the fire, talking and

reading. Then I worked on: cleaning my cameras and studying Eyre's journals and charts to plan ahead.

Shortly after Eyre's party arrived at Fowlers Bay the Aborigines departed, but – undaunted – on 22 November Eyre reconnoitred westwards. Failing to discover water, he retreated after only 70 km. He left within days on a second foray – this time taking a drayload of water-filled casks and trudging 100 km to within 20 km of the Head of Bight,

near Nullarbor on the Eyre Highway. Three of the best horses perished on his second protracted retreat through the December heat.

Eyre still believed he might find a way north from farther west, but only with a smaller party. On 18 December he dispatched *Waterwitch* to Adelaide with two of his men and a dray and an urgent request for fodder for the increasingly gaunt horses. Meanwhile, ignoring the searing heat, he rode westwards

The absence of coastal tracks sometimes forced Ed's group away from Eyre's route and on to the Eyre Highway (below), which links South and Western Australia. The first official road connecting these States, it wasn't built until 1941 – a century after Eyre's expedition – and wasn't sealed until 1976. Last year an average of 5000 cars and 4000 semi-trailers travelled the Eyre Highway each month. The 30 cm shingle-back lizard (right), a creature with a passion for fresh flowers, is often seen by the road.



KATHIE ATKINSON



on 30 December with a drayload of water kegs to fill en route, but the horses collapsed after only four days. "There appeared to be a disastrous fatality attending all our movements in this wretched region which was quite inexplicable," Eyre bewailed.

But grimly determined, Eyre pushed on with only a packhorse, finally reaching the Head of Bight on 7 January 1841. Aborigines camped there escorted him to Yeer comban cowie, a permanent well among the sand drifts, while sounding a stern warning. The next permanent water, they said, lay some 10 days' journey to the west, beyond the cliffs' end. Inland there was none whatever. From the waterhole, Eyre could see the Bight's cliffs stretching south-west to the horizon. Flinders' "interior sea" was non-existent, a fact confirmed when he and Neramberein struggled another 70 km along the cliffs before retreating again to Fowlers Bay.

Beautiful yet utterly forbidding, the sand drifts at the Head of Bight awed us. Yeer comban cowie's pre-

Beautiful yet forbidding dunes at Head of Bight were a disappointing sight for Eyre, who was desperate for water until local Aborigines led him to Yeer comban cowie, an area of permanent wells among the sand drifts. The wells can't be pinpointed today, but the scattered vegetation indicates water and is close to where Eyre recorded finding the wells.

cise location can't be pinpointed today, but vegetation in the vicinity indicated water. The trudge to the top of a massive dune nearly exhausted me, but the effort concentrated my mind as I studied sand drifts towering over the coast, stretching back towards Fowlers Bay. Why, I wondered again, did Eyre press on beyond here?

For once, Eyre's troubles of 1841 were secondary to our own affairs. At Nullarbor, Sally heard the results of pathology tests made at Port Lincoln three weeks before. An urgent operation was necessary. Although tense and disappointed, she was determined to remain cheerful as

we reorganised supplies, but the final parting was miserable.

Eyre returned to Fowlers Bay on 16 January from his reconnaissance along the cliffs. In 40 days of incessant toil he had travelled over 1035 km to explore just 220 km of arid coastline, and three conclusions were indisputable. No watered route northwards to central Australia (far less an inland sea) existed; beyond the Head of Bight the country was – if anything – worse than ever; and drays were dreadful impediments. The boat acquired at Port Lincoln would never go inland. He made one final attempt to push north towards central Australia, but it was in vain. The expedition was over.

Yet the explorer's pride goaded him. He resolved to mount a personal quest – "to attempt to force a passage around the Great Bight". With minimal provisions and leading their packhorses, only Baxter, Neramberein and Cootachah would accompany him on the 1400 km journey to Albany, King George Sound. And Wylie...

Hero, a government cutter that had replaced *Waterwitch*, anchored in Fowlers Bay on 26 January with fodder, and Wylie, an intelligent and resourceful King George Sound Aborigine, came ashore, delighted at his reunion with Eyre. The two had met during Eyre's cattle trip to Albany, and Eyre had brought him to Adelaide, but he had been too sick to travel when the expedition left there in June 1840.

Five days later *Hero* sailed for Adelaide with the remnants of the original expedition. "The bridge was broken down behind us, and

we must succeed in reaching King George Sound or perish," Eyre recorded grimly. But with a clear objective in sight, his fresh enthusiasm motivated his isolated band as they toiled through the February heat, reorganising. Eyre set 24 February for their departure, but – as if fated – *Hero* returned that morning. News of his decision to push westward had caused grave concern in Adelaide, and the cutter carried letters begging him to return.

Although moved, Eyre remained resolute. *Hero* sailed, and they moved off. The weather was fortunately

cool, and helped by water casks buried en route, they reached Yeer comban cowie at the Head of Bight on 2 March.

Pushing on beyond there, Roz and I missed Sally's cheery face, but our spirits were lifted by the magnificent cliffs lining the Bight. Extending more than 200 km, the Bunda Cliffs plunge 40 to 90 m into the sea. To the north, the limestone plateau stretched endlessly towards the Nullarbor Plain. "It's hard to believe how unpeopled this land is," Roz mused one night under the canopy of stars.

Eyre and one of the natives quit

The precipitous edge of the 40–90 m Bunda Cliffs (below) stretches for about 200 km east of Eucla. Eyre spent five days crossing the vast plateau above the cliffs in March 1841 and didn't find water until he reached the dunes at the cliffs' end, near where Eucla was later established. Eucla, one of the repeater stations on the East-West Telegraph Line (completed in 1877), once supported an isolated population of 50. Harvey Gurney (right) grew up in this home, one of the telegraph station's buildings, until 1962 when it was abandoned to the encroaching sand.



Yeer comban cowie on 7 March, driving the sheep and carrying sufficient water for three days. The main party was to follow up. Averaging almost 40 km a day, Eyre pushed relentlessly along the cliffs, damning their hopelessly porous surface. Rain clouds gathered but always dispersed. By the evening of 9 March they were already 150 km from the well. Retreat was becoming impossible. Another 60 km on, they were now without even drinking water and within a day the horses would surely collapse.

"The state of mind in which we passed on may be better imagined than described," Eyre recorded, sustained by prodigious mental and physical reserves. The next morning they reached the end of the great cliffs. There, among the sand drifts, they located some Aboriginal wells. They were utterly worn out, and both knew how lucky they were. After enlarging the soaks, Eyre returned to meet the main party on 12 March.

Eyre found water where Eucla would be established in 1877 as a repeater station on the East-West Telegraph Line. No one knows the Eucla region better than Harvey Gurney. Harvey, 48, grew up in the township's old telegraph residence until sand drifts buried it in 1962, and he ran nearby Moopina station until lack of water forced its closure in 1984. A few kilometres from Har-

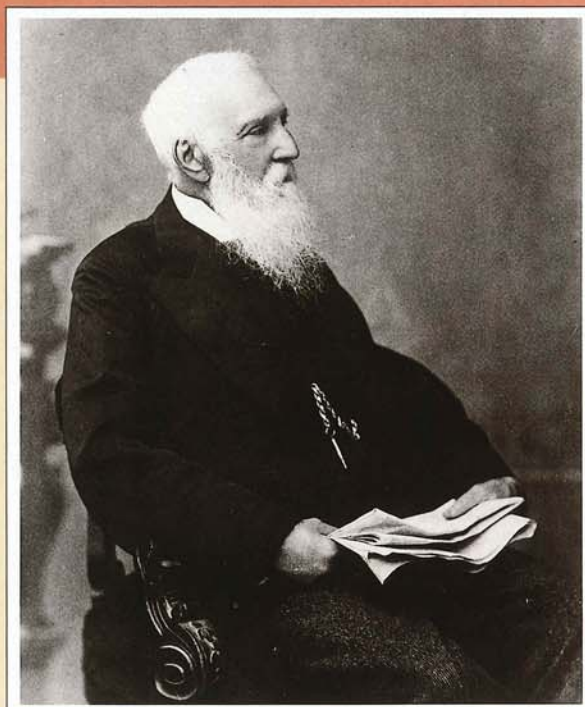
vey's sand-engulfed home we located the probable site of the well that saved Eyre's life. Sand drifts choking its surrounding vegetation testified to the force of the Bight's winds.

We talked about Eyre in Harvey's home atop an escarpment, looking down on the telegraph residence of his childhood buried in the Delisser Sandhills. I asked if Eyre might have found water west of Eucla. Harvey suggested the explorer's problem was time. "There's certainly water west of here," he said. "Some of it's quite drinkable, yet close by it may be salt. You've got to try in numerous places through the dunes, and without local knowledge that takes time."

From Eucla, Eyre could still have retreated to Fowlers Bay, but only with great difficulty. However, on 18 March he proceeded westwards hoping to locate another Aboriginal well. One day and 65 km later the horses were failing and no water had been found, so Eyre sent the horses back to the wells at Eucla to recover, remaining himself to guard the supplies. Alone, he pondered their situation. They had three sheep and 64 kg of flour – and he estimated they would take 12 weeks to reach Albany. "The task before us was indeed a fearful one," he wrote, but he resolved to advance at all costs.

Rejoined by Baxter and the horses on 25 March, he pushed on immediately. Next day he discarded about

EYRE THE COLONIAL GOVERNOR



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DESPITE his bleak discoveries, Eyre's privations captured the public imagination. "No individual has shown more exalted courage, or sustained more severe hardships," judged fellow-explorer Charles Sturt. Sturt's 1844-46 expedition route was influenced by Eyre's discoveries (AG 7), but it was not until John McDouall Stuart's 1860 expedition (AG 11) that explorers reached central Australia.

Eyre's treatment of the Aborigines was exemplary and in September 1841 he was appointed Resident Magistrate and Protector of the Aborigines at Moorundie, on the Murray in South Australia, where he pacified the tribes in an area notorious for bloody affrays between Aborigines and overlanders. He applied to lead further expeditions, but none eventuated. The knowledge he accumulated at Moorundie formed the basis of his *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Aborigines and the State of their Relations with Europeans*, published with his *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia* on

Eyre's time in Australia (1833-44) was a period of great satisfaction and achievement, but his later years as a colonial governor were far less rewarding. A romantic, Eyre often found society's harsh realities hard to accept. An honourable man with a high sense of duty, he was bitterly hurt by unjust accusations following his suppression of a Jamaican uprising. He spent the last 30 years of his life in virtual seclusion, devoting his still formidable energies to a loving family.

his return to London in 1845.

Eyre's future lay in colonial administration. He was Lieut-Governor of New Zealand from 1846 to 1853, marrying Adelaide Fanny Ormond there in 1850. In 1854 he was appointed Lieut-Governor of St Vincent, in the West Indies, Acting-Governor-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands in 1859, and in 1862 Acting Lieut-Governor and afterwards Governor-in-Chief of Jamaica where, in October 1865, he invoked martial law to quell a Negro rebellion. A month of reprisals left hundreds dead and Eyre was denounced in Britain, although hailed in Jamaica for his determination. A Royal Commission commended his promptness but questioned his rigour, and he was retired. Eyre's actions were officially vindicated in 1872 but his reputation had been irretrievably stained. He died at Tavistock, Devon, on 30 November 1901 – the year of Australia's federation and 60 years after he and Wylie reached Albany.

90 kg of supplies to lighten their load. Barred by thick scrub behind the coast, the party advanced along the beach, leading the shambling horses around mounds of seaweed. On 28 March, 180 km from Eucla, a pony collapsed and was abandoned. They cached more supplies that afternoon. After leaving two more horses behind, Eyre tramped into the night. The next evening the men drank their last water and the following morning Eyre and the Aborigines sponged up dew to brew some tea and eat their last damper. Without water, no more could be baked. They were now 230 km from Eucla and, haunted by unspoken possibilities, they struggled on for another 15 km. There, again among towering sand drifts, Eyre and Baxter

found a possible soakage. All hands began digging feverishly, suspense increasing as the well deepened. Damp at 1.5 m, at two there was water – and it was fresh!

Local Aborigines told Eyre of a better supply only a few kilometres west, and he moved to the new location. This water determined the siting of the Eyre telegraph station in 1877. The station, some 30 km south-east of Cocklebidy on the Eyre Highway, was built of corrugated iron, but in 1897 a fine stone building was erected, which was restored and opened in 1977 as the Eyre Bird Observatory – and it was there we stayed. We were now six weeks from Adelaide. Without Sally, the strains of camping were greater and we had just suffered an exhaust-

ing sand bogging. "Eyre Bird", as it is known, provided beds, showers, new faces and conversation. And a telephone. Sally's operation, we learned, had gone well.

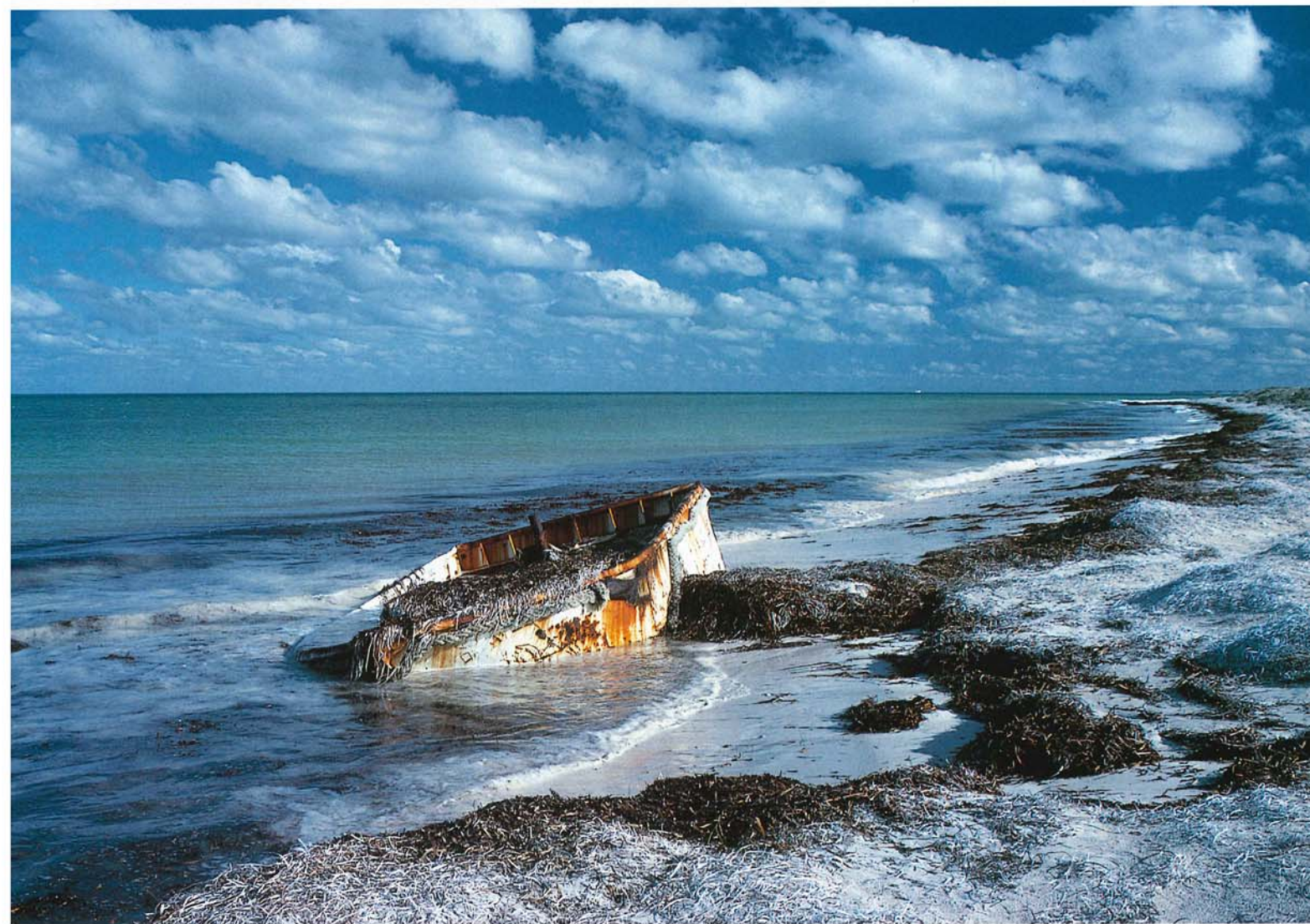
Unlike much of central Australia, the Bight's coastline remains virtually untouched. Unvegetated dunes, some 60 m high, rear over the coast, while a few kilometres inland virgin mallee whispers with the sea breezes. Ian Ashton, 37, the observatory's warden, voiced our feelings: "Everybody's overpowered by the dunes, but it's the peace and tranquillity here that people remember most." More than 450 km of this coastline, including the observatory, is included in the Nuytsland Nature Reserve.

The horrors of their last march



Coastal sands west of Eucla are extremely fine – 4WD travellers venture onto the dunes at their peril, as Ed discovered when he tackled one to gain extra height for photography. It took an entire morning to dig his vehicle out.

Wreckage from ill-fated ships occasionally lies scattered around the Bight, as it did in Eyre's day. The Southern Ocean's mighty swells sweep directly into the Bight, and there are no safe anchorages for hundreds of kilometres west of Fowlers Bay – this boat was washed up at Eucla during a storm.



Tied to his job ... Strong winds gusting over the Bight's cliffs force Ed to attach himself (right) to his 4WD with a tow rope before photographing the cliffs near where John Baxter, Eyre's sole European companion, was shot by one of their party on 29 April 1841. About 120 km west the cliffs dwindle to sandy coast, but it's a further 80 km before the next safe anchorage, Israelite Bay, once a repeater station on the East-West Telegraph Line. The roofless station building (below) still stands.



haunted Eyre's party. Still only half-way from Fowlers Bay to Albany, their horses utterly exhausted, Eyre faced the grim truth. "We had advanced into a country through which we could never retreat," he recorded.

On 5 April, Baxter and one of the Aborigines took three horses back for the cached supplies, returning five days later with woeful news. A horse had perished on the return journey, another was unable to get farther than a soak and they had to leave the supplies 60 km away. The next day Eyre and Wylie went on foot to recover them. Half-starved, they trudged the 120 km in three and a half days, humping 15 kg loads on their way back. Hunger imposes its own morality, and on 16 April the weakest horse was shot and its emaciated carcass stripped.

A few days later Eyre reprimanded the three Aborigines for taking horse meat above their allowance. Perturbed by Baxter's disquiet and fearing Eyre was leading them to their deaths, Wylie and Neramberein deserted despite Eyre's attempts to dissuade them. They were back after three days, Wylie expressing his regret. Scarce as it was, camp food was more abundant than bush tucker.

Guessing that one more long waterless stage lay ahead, Eyre dallied, hoping for rain. None fell. Finally, on 27 April he led his demoralised band westwards, past Twilight Cove, named after a schooner wrecked there in 1867, recording coolly: "We now entered upon the last fearful push which was to decide our fate." By 29 April they had travelled 75 km and were trudging along another line of waterless cliffs when tantalising



DICK SMITH

thunderclouds swept in off the Bight. Reluctant to leave with rain promising, Baxter urged Eyre to camp. Against his better judgement, Eyre gave way. It was a fateful decision.

Eyre's halt was almost due south of Caiguna on the Eyre Highway. We took three hours to drive the 40 km from Caiguna to the site, winding slowly coastwards along a jarring track through dwindling scrub. Obviously rarely visited, the windswept plateau that had witnessed so much drama seemed forlorn.

The thunderclouds of 29 April 1841 dispersed before dark. Bitterly disappointed, the party bedded down

behind windbreaks, Eyre taking first watch over the restless horses. At about 10.30 a gun flash pierced the gloom, and hurrying towards the camp site, Eyre met Wylie rushing headlong to find him. Wylie was distraught and almost speechless. The ghastly truth was soon confirmed: Baxter had been shot through the chest and lay fatally wounded.

"The frightful, the appalling truth now burst upon me, that I was alone in the desert," Eyre mourned. Alongside Baxter, the packs were in disarray: Neramberein and Cootachah were gone. Baxter, it seemed, had surprised them while they were



plundering the stores. With aching hearts, and soon bitterly cold, Eyre and Wylie endured the night watching over the horses. The next morning Eyre gathered their scattered possessions and, after abandoning everything possible, wrapped Baxter's body in a blanket (burial was impossible in the limestone) and left. Shadowing Eyre, Neramberein and Cootachah challenged him that afternoon, imploring Wylie to join them. Eyre warned them off, threatening to shoot. Haunted by their piteous cries, he led Wylie westwards during the night.

A concrete plinth and brass plate erected by John W. W. Graham for the Royal Western Australian Historical Society in 1930 marks the approximate site of Baxter's death. And Baxter Cliffs, which extend 150 km from Twilight Cove to Point Culver, were named in his honour in 1968. At the plinth, watching the crescent moon hanging in an indigo pre-dawn sky, I tried to comprehend the horrors of that night 147

When Eyre reached the Thomas River late in May 1841, it was the first flowing water he had seen since leaving Adelaide almost a year earlier. The Thomas flows through Cape Arid National Park, 120 km east of Esperance.

years earlier. "For an instant, I was almost tempted to wish that it had been my own fate instead of his," Eyre had written.

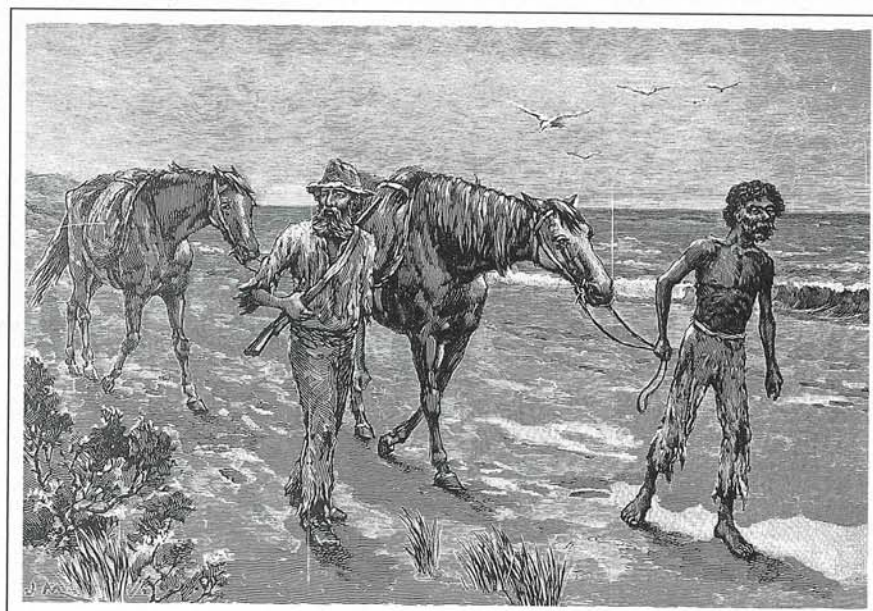
The coastline south-west of Baxter's lonely memorial remains extremely remote and we decided to detour inland via Balladonia to reach Israelite Bay, where Eyre arrived a fortnight after the killing. We were both tired; Roz was sick. The incessant travelling was grinding and pitching camp was now often a silent routine. But although we talked less, we knew each other better. Most importantly, we knew we could rely on each other.

The 400 km from Baxter's memorial to Israelite Bay took us four days to cover, in places averaging

only 10 km/h. Recent heavy rain demanded detours around swampy flats, and misjudging one stretch I bogged our 4WD to the chassis. If we couldn't get ourselves out, we faced a 50 km hike to Israelite Bay, where a lone fisherman lives. While Roz cut scrub, I jacked up the wheels, forcing branches into the slime beneath them. As the sun set five hours later we gave up for the day, exhausted, our hands painfully lacerated. It was mid-afternoon next day before we had built a track back to solid ground. Now, would the vehicle move? Lurching and slithering, it did – just! "We have just endured the two most exhausting and emotionally straining days of the entire trip," Roz scrawled in her diary at Israelite Bay.

Broken-hearted after Baxter's death, Eyre's fierce resolve triumphed over sorrow and distance. In three days he and Wylie advanced almost 140 km. But they were utterly worn out, the horses now six days without water. The party was facing

Bogged to the chassis 50 km from Israelite Bay, home to a lone fisherman, Ed and Roz spent nearly two days digging their vehicle out. "We have just endured the two most exhausting and emotionally straining days of the entire trip," Roz wrote later.

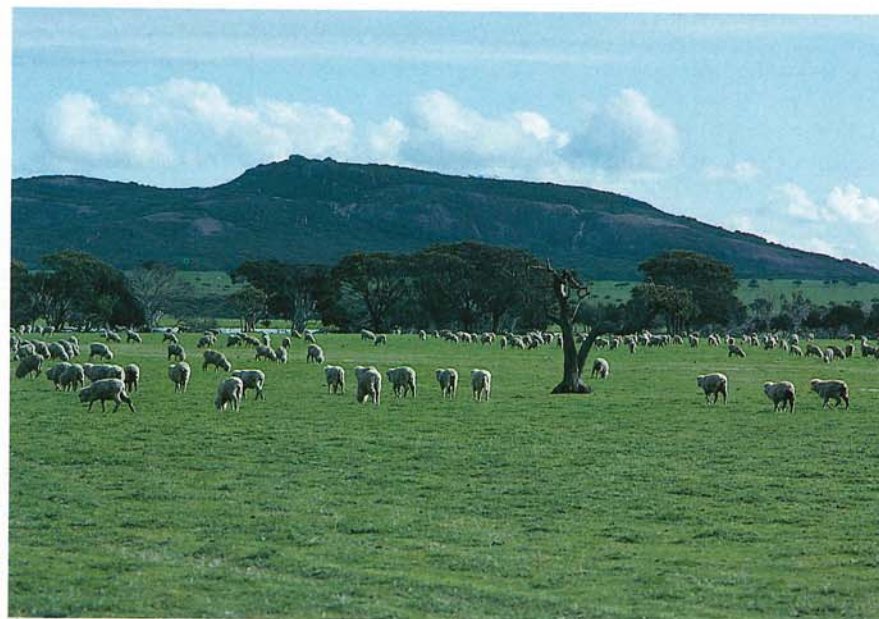


COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

Almost starving, Eyre and his Aboriginal companion Wylie pushed on to Point Culver after Baxter's death. Water was then no longer a problem, but they were desperately weak – so were their horses, almost certainly more gaunt than this period illustration suggests.

Open terrain beyond Point Malcolm allowed Eyre and Wylie to travel inland, bypassing capes and bays, but on 2 June they crossed to Rossiter Bay (right) where they encountered the *Mississippi*, a French whaler.

The plains surrounding Esperance were sandy heathlands when Eyre crossed them in June 1841. More than 100 years later it was discovered that the sandy soil lacked trace elements, copper and zinc in particular. American investment spearheaded agricultural development in the '50s and '60s, and today farming is the district's economic backbone.



death. The horses had limped another 20 km on 3 May when they found water in an Aboriginal well near Point Culver. Painfully conscious of their latest brush with death, Eyre brooded over Baxter's death while recuperating there. It was, he surmised, a case of manslaughter, not murder. And the fate of Neramberein and Cootachah in unfamiliar country, without horses, haunted him.

Now certain of finding water but critically short of food, Eyre and Wylie trudged southwards on 6 May towards Israelite Bay. They managed only 15 km a day, debilitated by stomach upsets caused by the horse meat and half-yearning to let life slip away into dreamy nothingness. "It was always with the greatest unwillingness we ever moved on again," Eyre admitted. But the horses were strengthening on the best grass since Fowlers Bay, and the interminable limestone finally gave way to granite.

On 17 May they saw water trickling over a granite slab – "the only approximation of *running* water we have found since leaving Streaky Bay", Eyre noted wryly.

Eyre and Wylie camped at Point Malcolm on 19 May. We spent two days there, still weary from the bogging, but charmed, as Eyre was, by its gnarled tea-trees and secluded bay. Point Malcolm offered Eyre and Wylie a crucial respite. For a week they gorged themselves on kangaroo, crabs and fish. The horses also recovered, and when they left on 26 May they travelled almost 30 km daily, for the first time in months occasionally riding. But Albany still lay 600 km away, and unable to hunt while travelling, they went hungry.

No longer barred by thick scrub behind the beach, they now generally travelled inland, bypassing capes and bays, but on 2 June they crossed to the coast. Cresting the beach dunes, they saw two boats tacking barely 6 km away! Stunned, they

kindled a fire and fired shots – but in vain. Disconsolate, they slumped down. Then they saw it: a ship at anchor, half-hidden behind a rocky islet 10 km away.

Jubilant, Eyre rode frantically, skirting the bay and scrambling across a precipitous hillside. Below him lay a French whaler, moored half a kilometre offshore. When Wylie came up they lit another fire, and shortly the *Mississippi's* master, Captain Rossiter, stepped ashore. That evening, regaled with the best the ship could offer, Eyre marvelled at the change in their fortunes – "so great, so sudden, and so unexpected that it seemed more like a dream than a reality".

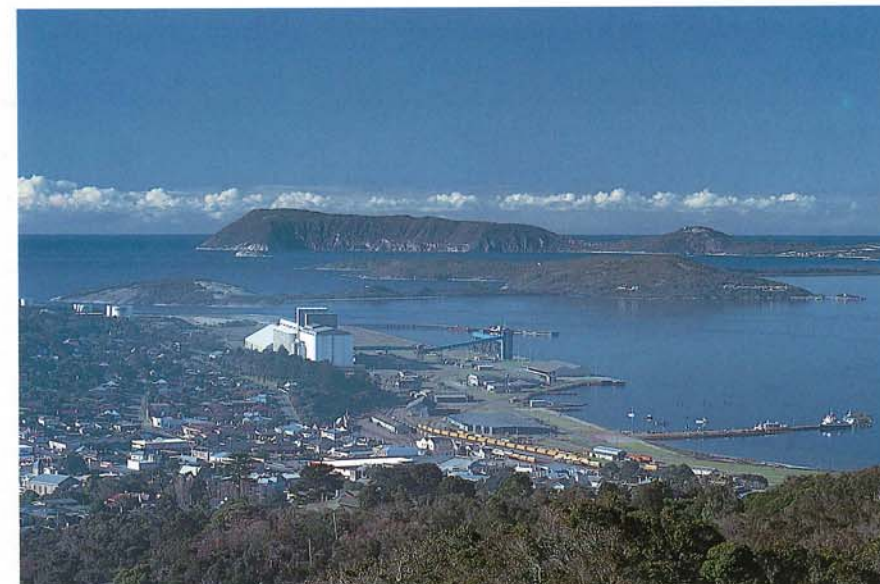
Don Mackenzie, 73, an Esperance fisherman and tugmaster who knows the area's anchorages – including Rossiter Bay, 30 km east of Esperance and named by Eyre in appreciation of Rossiter's hospitality – knows how lucky Eyre was. "Under sail it was very difficult coming in





COURTESY: MORTLOCK LIBRARY, SA

Eyre's chance meeting with Captain Rossiter (left) and the Mississippi was a remarkable coincidence. Eyre could easily have travelled inland that day, and whalers rarely chanced the region's hazardous inshore anchorages. Eyre lit a fire to attract the whaler's attention, and within minutes Rossiter stepped ashore to greet the two lone wanderers. Eyre and Wylie spent almost two weeks aboard the ship before pushing on for Albany, still 450 km away. The background in the photograph of Rossiter Bay (below) shows granite slopes, quite different to the sandy terrain envisaged by the artist.



Albany, with its magnificent port in King George Sound, is a thriving town supporting industries that include meat, fish, wood, wool and tourism. But when Eyre and Wylie paused to look over the Sound before descending to the town on 7 July 1841, it was a struggling settlement that had been established in 1826 to take possession of the western half of the continent. The two emaciated wanderers were greeted joyously by the townspeople, most of whom had assumed that they had perished around the Bight.

to anchor anywhere along this coast because of the hazards, islands and rocks and heaven knows what," he told me.

Eyre might have been forgiven if he had chosen to remain aboard the *Mississippi*, for he and Wylie still faced 450 km of unexplored country. But Rossiter and his crew farewelled them on 15 June, pressing supplies on them – including Cognac and a Dutch cheese. So recently desperate for water, they now had to detour around streams and swamps swollen by winter rains. "By stooping down, almost anywhere as we went along, we could have dipped a pint pot half full," Eyre wrote.

Miserably cold, Eyre and Wylie plodded through torrential rain for days, letting the horses loose just before they reached Albany early on 7 July. Wylie, who was coming home, was especially elated. Satisfaction and profound regret mingled in Eyre's mind, images of the gallant cavalcade that had left Adelaide more than 12 months earlier contrasting poignantly with the haunting memory of Baxter's death and their privations around the Bight.

Cresting a rise overlooking Albany, Eyre and Wylie halted in the tor-

rential rain. Eyre, passionate if not always prudent, was lost in thought: "I could not restrain a tear," he wrote, "as I called to mind the embarrassing difficulties and sad disasters that had broken up my party, and left myself and Wylie the two sole wanderers remaining at the close of an undertaking entered upon under such hopeful auspices."

It was true that the original aim of his expedition had failed, as he grappled with a landscape different from any a European could conceive. But after this grim journey around the Bight, Eyre now saw central Australia as it was. Today we know his prediction of sandy deserts and salty basins, with isolated ranges providing a few fertile areas, was largely accurate. He was convinced, by the scorching northerly winds around the Bight and the Aborigines' accounts, that no inland sea would be found.

Looking back on the country we had covered during our own expedition, Roz and I were awed by his privations – and by his indomitable will. Edward John Eyre had triumphed over seemingly insuperable odds.



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