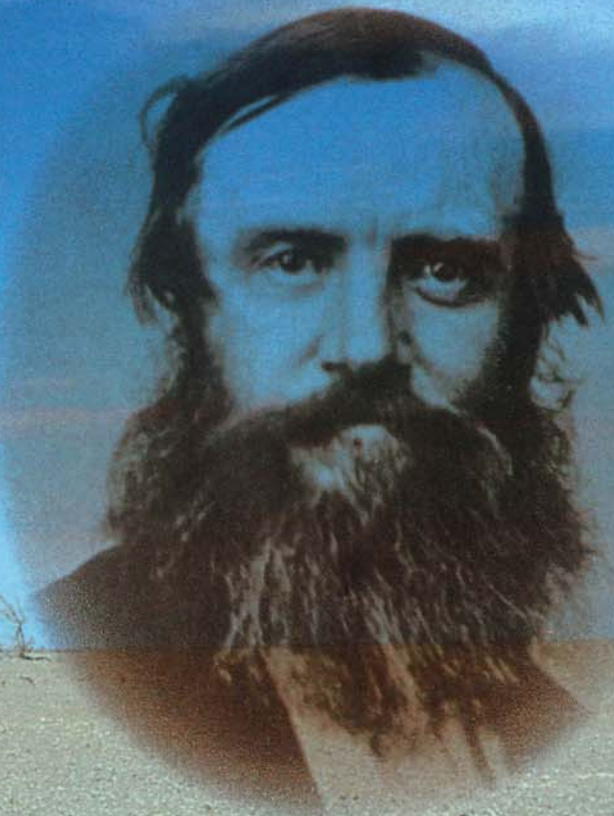


JOHN McDOUALL STUART

In the footsteps of Australia's greatest inland explorer

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD STOKES



Sustained by a fierce resolve to be the first European to cross Australia from south to north, explorer John McDouall Stuart endured three years of incessant journeying and privation between 1860 and 1862 before he won through to the north coast. Moved by the tenacity of the man who was revered by his contemporaries as “the king of Australian explorers”, Edward Stokes spent two months following Stuart’s epic expeditions across the continent for AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC.

Typical John McDouall Stuart country – the stark expanses of South Australia’s Lake Eyre South, 30 km north-east of Stuart Creek.

BEYOND Point Stuart's rocky headland the blue-green waters of Van Diemen Gulf glittered in the mid-morning light. Surging between clumps of mangroves, the incoming tide washed past me into a shell-studded cove. The sea – at last the sea!

Behind me, creepers intertwined to hide a massive banyan, below which stands a simple cairn, recording that John McDouall Stuart reached this point on 24 July 1862. A superb bushman, Stuart – on his third attempt to cross the continent from south to north – had finally opened and mapped a precariously watered 3000-kilometre route from Adelaide to the north coast.

"I advanced a few yards onto the beach," he wrote, "and was gratified and delighted to behold the water of the Indian Ocean."

But Stuart's achievement came at a high cost: his three expeditions had shattered his health. Three months later, returning to Adelaide, Stuart was close to death from scurvy. "What a sad difference there is from what I was when the party left North Adelaide . . ." he wrote. "My limbs so weak and painful that I am obliged to be carried about; my body reduced to that of a living skeleton, and my strength to an infantile weakness – a sad, sad wreck of former days . . ."

I marvelled at Stuart's tenacity as I looked out across Van Diemen Gulf, two months and 9000 km after leaving Adelaide to follow his routes and assess his expeditions. The harsh tracts that Stuart crossed six times had convinced me that he was, with little doubt, the greatest of Australia's inland explorers.

Seven of the men who reached the north coast with Stuart on 24 July 1862 face the camera the following year in Adelaide. Back row: W.P. Auld, J.W. Billiatt, R.W. Thring. Front: J. Frew, W.D. Kekwick, F.G. Waterhouse and S. King.

Venturing off known tracks in central Australia still requires complete self-sufficiency and months of planning were essential before I could begin to trace Stuart's routes. The real journey began at Stuart Creek, the explorer's base camp for his three expeditions, a swampy reach of permanent water 600 km NNW of Adelaide and 30 km southwest of Lake Eyre South. The surrounding country had been taken up as a station by Stuart following some of his earlier expeditions, and he always referred to Stuart Creek in his journals as Chambers Creek, after one of his patrons, pastoralist James Chambers.

From there I was to work gradually northwards in my four-wheel-drive, following the general line of Stuart's expeditions with my co-driver, David May, a 38-year-old Englishman keen to cross Australia. My aim was to locate some 70 key points along the explorer's line-of-march across the continent to the north coast at Van Diemen Gulf.

Stuart left Stuart Creek on his first attempt to cross the continent on 2 March 1860, accompanied by only two men, William Kekwick and Benjamin Head, and with a mere 13 horses. When we broke camp there in mid-August 1986, we were awed by the momentous undertaking he had



In a wet start to their journey in Stuart's footsteps, Ed Stokes hangs on to the roof rack to photograph David May negotiating the track leading out of Stuart Creek station. Stuart Creek, which drains into Lake Eyre South, has flooded the track after heavy rain.

faced; that he aimed to cross the 1800 km between Stuart Creek and the mouth of the Victoria River with such a vulnerable party highlighted his determination.

Our first 250 km lay through stony saltbush plains west of Lake Eyre. With annual rainfall averaging only some 150 mm and evaporation rates soaring above 3000 mm (compare this with Sydney's average rainfall of 1200 mm and evaporation rate of 1600 mm), the region's mound springs were Stuart's lifeline through northern South Australia. These springs often look like miniature volcanoes standing on the plains. Oases of bubbling artesian water glistening with mineral salts, Stuart had found and mapped many of them in 1859. Although Peter Warburton had been first to see them, in 1858, it was Stuart who was quick to perceive that this line of unfailing water supplies through Australia's lowest rainfall country – they range from Marree to the vicinity of Oodnadatta – would provide stepping stones into the interior. "It is a wonderful country, scarcely to be believed," he wrote. "I can go from here to Adelaide at any time of the year and in any season."

The springs' abundant water determined the routing of the Overland Telegraph line, opened in August 1872, and 19 years later the railway to Oodnadatta followed it. On the flows at Elizabeth Springs Stuart commented that, "There is enough water running to drive a flour mill in two or

three places." Today the mound springs are weakened, depleted by countless man-made bores, and 19th-century communications technology has long been superseded. The Telegraph's morse operators ceased their tapping long ago, and the Ghan line through Oodnadatta closed in 1980.

Bronzed gangers were pulling up the old Ghan line sleepers as we drove towards Oodnadatta, an area that had been explored by Stuart in 1859, and the Telegraph's silent buildings seemed ghostly. Boiling our midday billy by Peake Creek (named by Stuart) and its crumbling, graffitied repeater station, David summed up my feelings: "Let's have this cuppa and clear off . . ."

"A FEED? Gee, I dunno . . ." wondered Oodnadatta's only visible inhabitant when we arrived there that day after dark. Then the shadowy figure added hopefully, "What time d'ya say it is? Seven . . . Ya might find something!" Oodnadatta township, population 200, is never busy, as we discovered the next morning. Social Security

In northern South Australia, water from naturally occurring mound springs ensured Stuart a safe route across otherwise dangerously arid country. Rich in mineral salts, the springs' sediments have formed great mounds over the centuries like this one, Blanche Cup Springs, the flat-topped elevation in the background.



COURTESY MORTLOCK LIBRARY OF SA

cheques provide much of its income, and the scatter of dusty homes along its few hundred metres of bitumen seem forlorn, silent save for moaning she-oaks and cawing crows.

Adam and Linnie Plate's Pink Roadhouse, the general store and an unrivalled advice centre for travellers, stands out against the decline – its eye-catching pink facade reflecting the Plates' enthusiasm, undiminished after 14 years in Oodnadatta.

"Life's a challenge here if you want to make it one, but it's relaxed," Linnie called across the counter, juggling incoming telephone and transceiver messages. Ever-cheerful, the 35-year-old mother of three added: "A lot of people say I must be lonely out here, but I never have a moment to myself." Never empty, the Pink Roadhouse was proof of that.

Libby Morrison, 29, one of Oodnadatta's two bush nurses, agreed that Oodnadatta isn't lonely. Lunching on a roadhouse "Oodnaburger", she told





The southern Northern Territory's distinctive outcrops were key stepping stones in Stuart's advance in April 1860, providing invaluable waterholes and clear views ahead. The mesa (above), viewed from the rocky summit of Mount Humphries, is typical. Gums growing in the usually dry bed of the Hugh (right) contrast with the stark slopes of the Macdonnell Ranges. Stuart followed the Hugh River to reach the Macdonnells here at Stuart Pass on 12 April 1860.

me, "You go on remote control in cities, it all closes in on you. Every time I go to Melbourne I want to stay less time, I just want to get back here."

Stuart would have concurred. Relaxed and confident in unknown country, the explorer was ill at ease in Adelaide society. A hardened bushman, he had little regard for the colony's "gentleman explorers", burdened with their drayloads of "necessities". Pushing north-west from Oodnadatta, David and I marvelled at the sheer speed of Stuart's advance: 50 to 60 km daily, across jar-



Lynnie Plate, 35 and a mother of three, relishes her busy life at Oodnadatta. Lynnie and her husband Adam run the Pink Roadhouse, the tiny township's main general store and most thriving business.



ring stony plains and low sand ridges. Lightly equipped and provisioned, yet always totally self-sufficient, his fast-travelling horse parties helped ensure his ultimate success.

However, Stuart's extraordinary ability to "read" the country and an almost uncanny sense of direction were his greatest assets. Unlike his mentor Sturt, Stuart went where the country – not predetermined compass courses – led him. He rarely advanced without first having discovered permanent water, and never bypassed elevations, with their promise of views ahead and rocky waterholes.

Across the border into the Northern Territory, we followed him through low, distinctive outcrops. "I have not passed such splendid country since I have been in the Colony," he reported on 4 April 1860, camped by Mount Humphries, whose summit presents a superb vista: conical mesas (raised landforms with more or less flat tops and steep sides, like Humphries itself) compass the northern horizon, lonely sentinels above

Usually dry and dusty, the country between Finke and Alice Springs was carpeted with fresh green and brilliant wildflowers in September 1986. This was the scene at Lilla Creek station. But the unexpected green did not extend beyond Central Mount Stuart, thus allowing Ed to photograph the country probably as Stuart saw it.

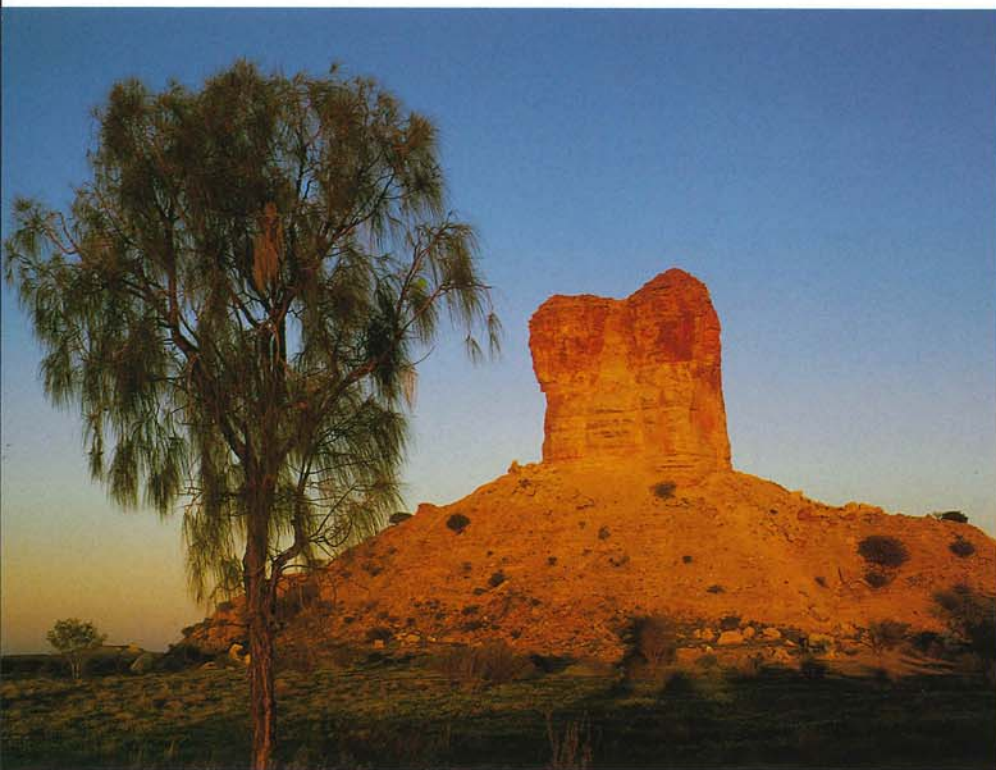
the Finke River's rust-red sand ridges.

The "splendid country" around Mount Humphries was carpeted with fresh green when we saw it late in August 1986, delighting Don and Colleen Costello, owners of Lilla Creek, a 2800 sq. km cattle station that carries 6000 head in an average season. Inured to hardship and disappointment, outback people have a respect for Australia's inland explorers that is rare in the cities, and the Costellos were no exception. Yarning after a long day in the saddle mustering, Don commented, "Stuart's biggest problem was always finding water. At least along the Finke the

waterholes usually last two or three years after rain." Colleen chipped in, "But three times would be a bit much, wouldn't it?"

I nodded in agreement. The knowledge that Stuart crossed and re-crossed so much of Australia not once but three times made an increasingly deep impression on us as our journey continued. Stuart first saw the Finke in a good season, its waterholes full, but a year later it was virtually dry. "Oh that it would rain, this is miserable slow work," he noted grimly on 24 February 1861.

Our first objective beyond Lilla Creek was Chambers Pillar, a 50 m high monolith rising 104 m above the plain and named by Stuart on 6 April 1860 after James Chambers. The Pillar is surrounded by superb country – sand ridges thick with acacias and stands of desert oak. Another 50 km to the north are the James Ranges, the first continuous range discovered by Stuart north of the Flinders. "Our course was intercepted by deep perpendicular ravines," Stuart wrote



◀ **Stuart and his two companions** were the first Europeans to see Chambers Pillar. They reached the monolith, which rears 104 m above the plain, on 6 April 1860, and Stuart named it after his long-standing patron and closest friend, the pastoralist James Chambers. It became a beacon for Giles, Warburton and other inland explorers.

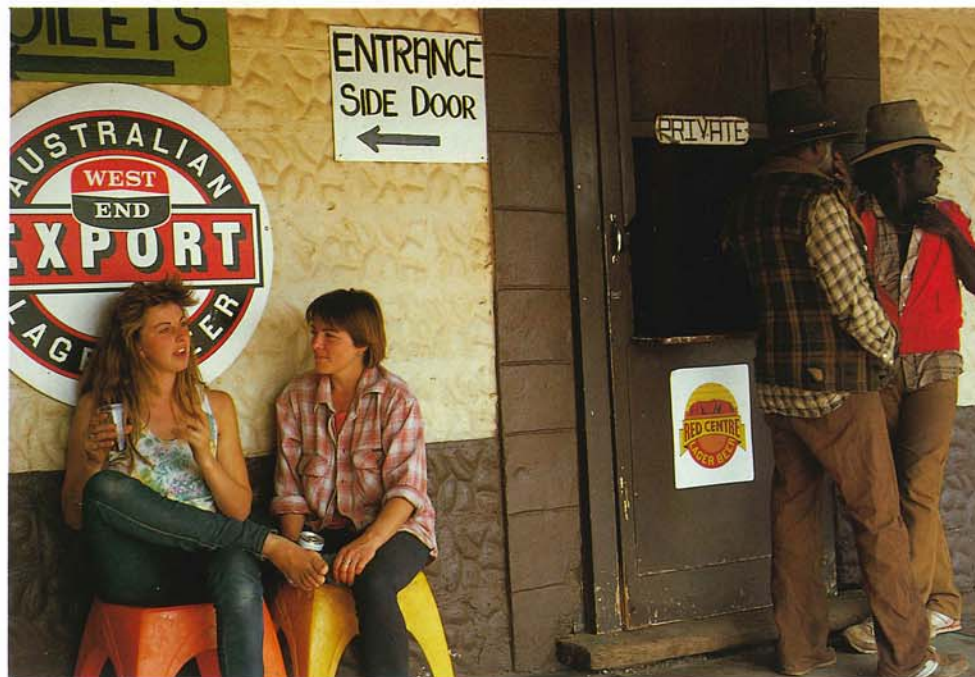
The pub at Barrow Creek, a tiny settlement beside the Stuart Highway 50 km north-east of Central Mount Stuart, is its only social venue, well patronised by local station hands and travellers. Barrow Creek was once the site of an Overland Telegraph repeater station.

while crossing the James Ranges that April. "Our bags were torn to pieces, and our clothes were in the same predicament." Rough the James Ranges certainly are, but Stuart was immeasurably cheered. Here, at last, was a promising change of country.

Three weeks and 1000 km after leaving Stuart Creek we camped by the Hugh River, just south of the Macdonnell Ranges. This was an idyllic spot. Water lay in pools along the Hugh's 50 m wide bed, and statuesque gums lined the grassy banks. From a nearby outcrop the Hugh's course was clearly visible until lost in Stuart's Pass, the precipitous gorge he followed through the Macdonnells.

Although already suffering from scurvy, Stuart exulted in the Macdonnells' brooding grandeur. After crossing them in mid-April 1860 he wrote: "The country in the ranges is as fine a pastoral country as man could wish to possess, with grass to the tops of the hills and an abundance of water." Different indeed from the parched, spinifex-infested country 500 km to the east that he and Sturt saw in 1845, the Macdonnells were a haven on Stuart's two subsequent expeditions.

Usually dry and dusty, in September 1986 we found the "red centre"



verdant – and at the Hugh River it had me worried. Stuart, I knew, twice saw the Macdonnells after exceptional rains, but farther north (until past the Roper) he encountered only parched grasses. I wanted to photograph the country as Stuart saw it, and was now facing the bleak prospect of having to defer further progress until drier times if the country farther north proved too green.

My dilemma was resolved a few days later in Alice Springs (see AG 8). In a mockery of the weary months Stuart had to suffer riding in search of water, I spent a morning there telephoning most stations between Alice and Katherine – so building a picture of the ground conditions ahead. We were in luck. The exceptional rains that inundated the Macdonnells in June and July had barely



The vast, grey-green sea of the NT's depressed mulga plains, seen from a knoll on Hamilton Downs station. This is the view that confronted Stuart after he crossed the Macdonnells. He rode towards Mt Freeling, the right-hand smudge on the horizon, 100 km to the north.

Beyond the Macdonnells, Stuart spent weeks riding through mulga like this along Bonney Creek. The explorer likened the termite mounds to gravestones, and bewailed the damage done to his horses and equipment by the jagged scrub.



extended to Central Mount Stuart, 200 km to the north. Beyond that, all was brown. "Dry as a bone," one station reported; "bloody dry," answered another glumly.

At the Macdonnell Ranges, Stuart was over halfway from Adelaide to the mouth of the Victoria River, 1000 km NNW, and only 700 km from its headwaters. But he was not to reach it, defeated by lack of water – and

scrub. Near Hamilton Downs station, on the Macdonnells' northern flank, he sighted the Territory's mulga, a seemingly impenetrable grey-green sea stretching to the far horizon.

Stuart's strategy hardly varied in the grim months ahead. With a compass bearing on the next elevation, perhaps 100 km or two days away, he forced his way through the scrub – never expecting to find water or even

to sight the elevation again until it was reached. Of one particularly dense patch he wrote: "The mulga has torn our hands, faces, clothes, and what is of more consequence, our saddle-bags all to pieces . . . Had we gone further into it we should have lost everything off the horses." Even with today's maps and tracks, navigating through thick mulga requires constant vigilance. With

visibility limited to 50 m – and often less – maintaining a sense of direction is difficult, especially on overcast days. Our own difficulties highlighted Stuart's consummate bushmanship.

On 22 April 1860, seven weeks and 1000 km from Stuart Creek, Stuart's party reached what he estimated to be the centre of Australia – a goal that had eluded Eyre, Sturt, Leichhardt

and Gregory. The next day Stuart named Central Mount Sturt (re-named Stuart later against his wishes). I recalled Stuart's modest record of his achievement as I photographed the precipitous, rocky slopes he ascended on 23 April: "After a deal of labour, slips and knocks arrived at the top ... I then named the mount Sturt after the Father of Australian

Exploration, for whom we gave three hearty cheers and one more for Mrs Sturt and family."

Stuart and his two companions were already subsisting on short rations, the horses were weakening, water was scarce and Stuart's scurvy was worse. "My mouth and gums are so bad that I am obliged to eat flour and water boiled, and the pains in my

◀ **Stuart reached and named Tennant Creek on 6 June 1860.** From nearby Mount Samuel, which he named after his brother, he had this view to the Short Range, 40 km to the north-west. He rode in that direction, still hoping to reach the Victoria River.

In a dusk like the one below, on 26 June 1860 Stuart and his two companions were ambushed at nearby Attack Creek by more than 30 Aborigines. Warning volleys barely halted their "bold and daring" attack. Desperately short of provisions and suffering from scurvy, Stuart retreated to Adelaide.



"Immense plains of red, light soil covered with nothing but spinifex and large gum trees – not a blade of grass."
The South Australian Advertiser of 8 October 1860 quotes Stuart after his first attempt to cross the continent.

limbs are almost insufferable," he wrote matter-of-factly on 14 May. I was awed by the party's vulnerability as I gazed out over the sweeping plains surrounding Central Mount Stuart, yet Stuart's fierce determination and self-reliance drove him on.

He now made a 200 km north-westerly thrust into the Tanami Desert from the centre, until lack of water forced a desperate retreat. "My party is too small, it is terrible killing work," he lamented in his diary a week later. The horses never fully recovered from that foray, but Stuart pushed north to discover Tennant Creek early in June. The end came three weeks later on 26 June, after another thrust to the north-west, when hostile Aborigines attacked the exhausted party at Attack Creek.

No lives were lost, but Stuart reluctantly turned back, agonised with scurvy and critically short of rations. "With such as these for enemies ... it would be madness and folly to attempt more," he recorded, and covering his bitter disappointment he added, "Man proposes and God disposes."

David and I, relieved to have finished photographing Stuart's 1860 expedition, retreated temporarily to Tennant Creek – and numerous iced coffees. For Stuart it was different. A 2000 km march lay between Attack Creek and Adelaide – a grim retreat past drying waters with companions who seemed "as if they were 100 years old". Emaciated and exhausted, the three men reached Adelaide on 7 October 1860.

STUART never doubted that he would make another attempt to cross the continent, and – finally aware of his stature – the Government immediately voted £2500 to equip a larger, 49-horse expedition. Kekwick went with Stuart again as second-in-command, but instead of Head there

things, a system that recognises the essential importance of each industrial interest in this young community, and that provides for the full and fair development of all.

EXPLORATION OF THE INTERIOR.

RETURN OF MR. STUART.

Mr. Stuart has returned from his Northern Expedition, having arrived in town on Sunday afternoon, per Marion. Our Port reporter forwarded us the following document without signature, and in some other respects evidently incomplete, and we have been in some degree of doubt as to whether to publish it or not. We have, however, finally decided on laying it before our readers, not wishing to take the responsibility of keeping back so interesting a narrative. We shall, doubtless, have more precise information in a day or so. Mr. Chambers informs us that Mr. Stuart has brought down many rare botanical specimens, and his journal is now being written up. Meanwhile the following statement will be read with interest, although, as already remarked, the absence of Mr. Stuart's signature from the document has somewhat perplexed us as to the course which, under the circumstances, it was best to pursue. The following are the particulars:—

"As Mr. Goyder is dispatching a mail from hence, I embrace the opportunity of writing to inform you that I arrived here on the 1st inst., after a painful journey in a very exhausted state. I am sorry that I have been unable to make the north-west coast—the difficulties have been more than I was able to overcome. After making the centre I was visited by that dreadful disease, the scurvy, which completely dis-

CUTTING FROM THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ADVERTISER

went 10 others, "all fine young men," the Adelaide *Observer* noted with satisfaction, "well able to bear the trials and privations their journey will necessarily entail."

The second expedition left Stuart Creek on New Year's Day, 1861. Stuart still aimed to reach the mouth of the Victoria River, and retraced his tracks to Attack Creek. Although extreme heat and a shortage of water between Oodnadatta and the Macdonnells made "dreadfully slow work" of the journey, he reached Attack Creek on 24 April. Beyond there Stuart explored the low ranges that trend north-westwards, examining every ephemeral creek for the possibility of permanent water. It was often a fruitless search, but worse

country lay ahead – as David and I soon discovered.

One hundred kilometres north-west of Attack Creek the hills give way to an immense, depressed expanse Stuart named Sturt Plains. Dry and desolate in 1861, they were the same in 1986; the only redeeming feature was the extensive series of waterholes Stuart named Newcastle Waters. "It is a splendid sheet of water, and is certainly the gem of Sturt's Plains," wrote Stuart on discovering its reaches on 23 May 1861. He scouted incessantly from Newcastle Waters to the west, north-west and north-east during May and June, but waterless scrub always barred his way.

I had to photograph all of Stuart's

numerous journeys in the area. We based ourselves in Elliott, which has a floating population of 80 to 90 whites and 300 to 400 Aborigines depending on the time of the year – one of the string of small, dusty communities along the Stuart Highway. There an almost overwhelming lassitude descended on me. The cause was the landscape itself, for around Elliott the usual problems of photographing explorers' routes seemed infinitely magnified: unseasonably hot weather, smoke-hazed skies, featureless plains and never-ending scrub conspired against me.

The degradation of much of the country since Stuart's time was an even greater obstacle. His descriptions of localities were my photographic starting points, but often it was virtually impossible to match them with what exists today. The problem was highlighted at Lake Woods, Newcastle Waters' usually dry overflow, which Stuart crossed early in May 1861. "The poor horses have been falling the whole of the day," he wrote, "the grass being so long and thick that they could not possibly see the large deep holes and cracks in the ground..." My diary entry there was totally different. "A wasteland of compacted clay, no grass at all," I noted, deeply depressed by the devastated landscape.

Certainly, we saw the area after wet season rains had failed twice, and –

with a developing drought – the stations were still carrying stock. Also, massive flooding in 1974–75 had killed many hectares of trees around Lake Woods. But equally clearly, cattle were partly to blame for the landscape – a view confirmed by Dick Wilson, overseer of Newcastle Waters station. "The cattle have bugged up the waterholes," he told me bluntly. Silted by erosion caused by early overstocking, the permanent waterholes on which Stuart relied are today much reduced. But cattle aren't the only culprits, as the countless cans and other litter I had to remove before photographing any creek along Stuart's routes testified.

The desecration angers Jessie Nissen, a 71-year-old Chinese-Aborigine battler living in Elliott. We met one morning at Longreach, Newcastle Waters' largest waterhole. "There used to be more birdlife; hardly anybody came down here before," she recalled. "Folks come from Alice Springs now. Eastertime you go down here, the whole waterhole is campers – boats everywhere." Cans glinted by Longreach's milk-brown waters and a few pelicans wheeled overhead.

The area depressed us, but for Stuart a curse seemed to hang over Sturt Plains. During May and June 1861, Stuart made 10 major attempts to break through to the Victoria River or the Gulf of Carpentaria, but despite



A bore-fed dam by Lake Woods, on Newcastle Waters station. The station was facing drought conditions in September 1986, after the usual wet-season rains had virtually failed two years running.

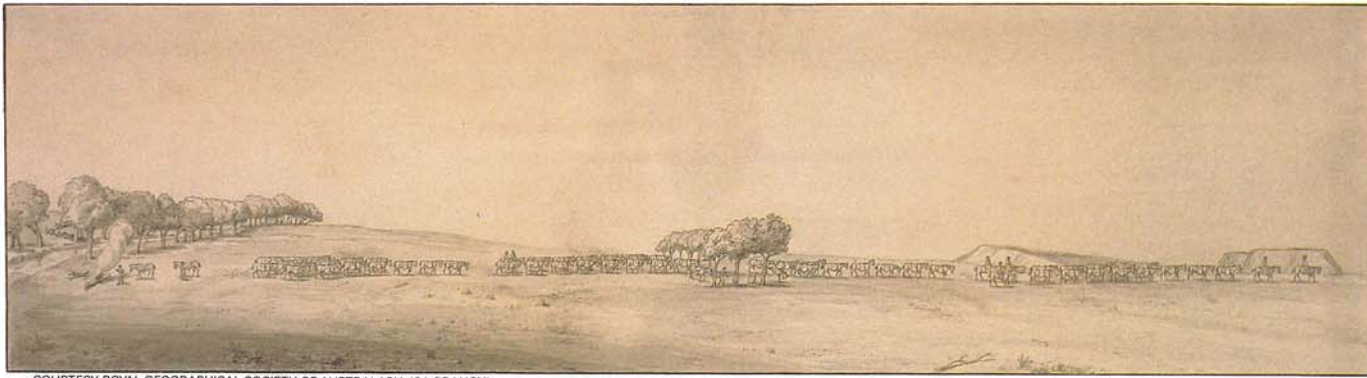
◀ *When Stuart crossed Lake Woods in May 1861 the depression was covered by waist-high grass, but in September 1986 the usually dry lake was bare. Part of Newcastle Waters station, Lake Woods typified the difficulties author Ed Stokes had in photographing Stuart's route as the explorer saw it.*

riding over 1600 km his three-man scouting parties never reached farther than 70 km from Newcastle Waters. Although at one point only 150 km from the Victoria's headwaters, even Stuart could not conquer the parched scrub, and by late June the expedition was facing defeat.

Equipment was disintegrating, the horses were worn out, and the men were "beginning to show the effects of starvation". Provisioned for eight months, the party had already been out for six. Finally, on 11 July, Stuart made the anguished decision to retreat to Adelaide for the second time. "I believe I have left nothing untried that has been in my power," he wrote that day. "I have tried to make the Gulf and river, both before

rain fell, and immediately after it had fallen; but the results were the same, *unsuccessful*."

STUART'S privations captured the public imagination when he was welcomed back to Adelaide on 23 September 1861. Hailed by the press as "the Napoleon of explorers", he was presented with the Patron's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society for his 1860 expedition, and the Government immediately voted funds for another attempt. Ignoring his obvious need for complete recuperation, the explorer threw himself into frenetic preparations, and a month after his return the advance party of his third transcontinental expedition rode northwards.



COURTESY ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALASIA (ISA BRANCH)



Stuart took 11 men and 71 horses on his 1862 expedition. Breaking camp each day, depicted here by Annie Billiatt after a sketch by Stephen King, was a well-organised routine. Stuart and his most experienced bushman, F.W. Thring, lead the way, Kekwick brings up the rear and small parties lead the four groups of packhorses.

◀ **At Bonney Creek, 90 km south of Tennant Creek, Ed Stokes catches up on his own diary as he waits for the light to improve before he photographs a site along Stuart's route.**

Stuart himself was delayed in Adelaide for several weeks by a severe hand injury caused by a rearing horse, and faced the possibility – narrowly avoided – of amputation. Meanwhile, at Stuart Creek, the best organised and equipped of his expeditions was assembling: 71 horses, 11 men – mostly young but all determined – and provisions for seven months. Kekwick was again second-in-command. Before leaving Stuart Creek on 8 January 1862 Stuart issued detailed regulations to his men, the distilled wisdom of his unrivalled experience – and which even today are pertinent. For example, the men were forbidden to leave the line-of-march without Stuart's or Kekwick's knowledge, and while marching no water was to be used without permission. Nothing was left to chance.

A compelling urgency drove the 1862 expedition. Almost certainly realising his health could never withstand a fourth attempt, Stuart forced the pace – determined to have suf-



The Patron's Medal of the august Royal Geographical Society was awarded to Stuart for his 1860 expedition. The motto, *Ob Terras Reclusas*, means "For the discovery of lands".

COURTESY ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALASIA (ISA BRANCH)

ficient rations to battle a way across Sturt Plains.

They rode northwards, caching supplies and abandoning horses when any weakened to maintain the pace. Despite hostile Aborigines, Newcastle Waters was reached on 5 April. The country was drier than the year before, ruling out any possibility of reaching the Victoria River. Instead, Stuart resolved to travel north, aiming to reach the Adelaide River just west of Arnhem Land.

"You'll never get through," a station hand advised us in 1986, referring to the disused Murrnaji Stock Route. However, it was the only track leading north-west from Newcastle Waters Station towards Howell Ponds, the waterhole discovered by Stuart on 16 April 1862 that finally allowed him to escape Sturt Plains.

Although the route was barely passable and occasionally hidden under waist-high grass, the Murrnaji's belts of healthy trees restored our enthusiasm. But – surrounded by

scrubby, dead-level country – we wondered how Stuart had ever discovered the Ponds. "This would be fearful country for anyone to be lost in, as there is nothing to guide them," he cautioned. We agreed, constantly checking our dead-reckoning navigation to our only landmark – an easily missed windmill 80 km away.

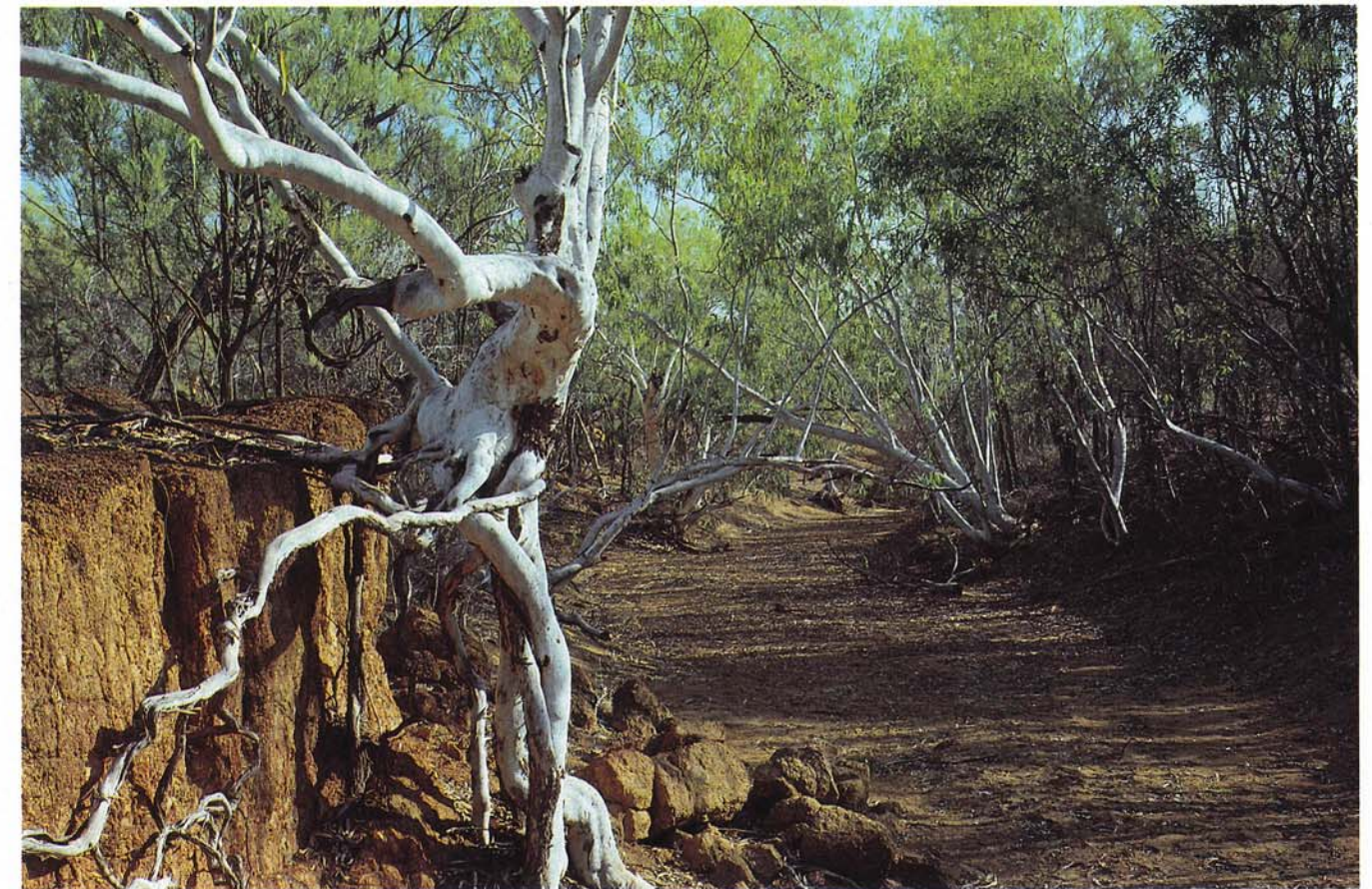
Stuart had far greater difficulties

around Howell Ponds. Only 70 km north lies McGorrery Pond on Daly Waters, the next strategic waterhole the explorer discovered – yet it took another month's scouting to find it. Daly Waters trends northwards and, immeasurably cheered, Stuart wrote on 23 May: "The creek is improving wonderfully. We have now passed some fine holes of water." Three

weeks later, 80 km NNE of McGorrery Pond, he discovered the Strangways River. Stuart was exultant. Not just another sandy creek, the Strangways was the most dramatic improvement seen since the Macdonnell Ranges. Ten-metre sandstone cliffs lined its boulder-strewn course, and bamboos shaded detached, crystal-clear pools rich with mauve waterlilies.

The remains of a bore on the overgrown, long-disused Murrnaji Stock Route, 90 km north-west of Newcastle Waters, was the only certain landmark for Ed Stokes and David May on one 80 km stretch of Stuart's route. Stuart commented on the ease of getting lost here, and Ed says the danger still exists.

Daly Waters, near McGorrery Pond, 20 km south of Daly Waters township. Named by Stuart on 23 May 1862, the north-flowing Daly Waters, then a series of waterholes, was a vital discovery: it enabled Stuart to break out of arid country. The pond was named for John McGorrery, the expedition's brawny farrier.



As Stuart saw it

ASK Territorians who John McDouall Stuart was and you'll often be answered with mumbling guesswork, as I discovered while retracing the explorer's transcontinental expeditions. Ironically, it was an Aborigine, a descendant of the Warramunga people who attacked Stuart in 1860 at Attack Creek, north of Tennant Creek, who, of all the people I met, knew most about the tenacious explorer. Dave Curtis's knowledge of Stuart's expeditions is prodigious, and he has located a hitherto virtually unknown site along Stuart's route.

We first met in Dave's Katherine home. Dave, 34, works for the Commonwealth Employment Service, but I quickly realised his heart was in the bush – and most of all in remote, almost inaccessible country. His interest in Stuart began at school in Tennant Creek he told me, a quiet reticence masking his passionate interest in the explorer. "That's where my people come from," he said. "They had a bit to do with history – where they attacked Stuart – and that spurred me on."

Dave showed me a well-thumbed file of newspaper cuttings describing his search for the spot where Stuart reached the south-western Arnhem Land escarpment, 180 km south-east of Darwin. Beyond the reach of even rough tracks, the area has been visited by few Europeans since Stuart's 1862 expedition. However in 1985, after several expeditions over a period of three years, Dave located the site. That evening in Katherine he agreed to take me there.

Early one morning a month later we rendezvoused near Pine Creek and that night, after a rugged day's travelling by 4WD towards the escarpment, Dave recalled his quest to find the site. His search began with the route map published with Stuart's journals, and an engraving there that presents a clear, easily recognisable view from the escarpment. Dave then studied detailed topographical maps of the area, building up mind-pictures of the landscape.

Although romanticised in the engraving reproduced in the 1864 edition of his published Journals (above), the scene at right shows what Stuart saw from that point on the western escarpment of the Arnhem Land plateau on 10 July 1862. Stuart guessed correctly that the stream below would lead him to the coast.

It sounded simple. In fact his success resulted from painstaking map interpretation and the intuition of a true bushman. On his first expedition in 1862 Dave had to blaze a track through 60 km of virgin forest, twisting and turning with the landscape. In 1985 on a later expedition he reached the escarpment. "I scrambled up it," he remembered, "then walked along the top, aiming to get into a position to view the same scene that was drawn. That's what I wanted to do ... to get to the exact spot."

It was to this precise point that Dave took me in October 1986, his loping stride reflecting a sure sense of direction. The panorama from the escarpment was superb: to the north and south were its sheer walls. The valley floor was canopied with dense forest, with the protruding palms Stuart

described; and beyond a gorge we had passed through, a steep flat-topped knoll rose. The engraving in Stuart's book is exaggerated and romanticised, but the topographical detail is identical.

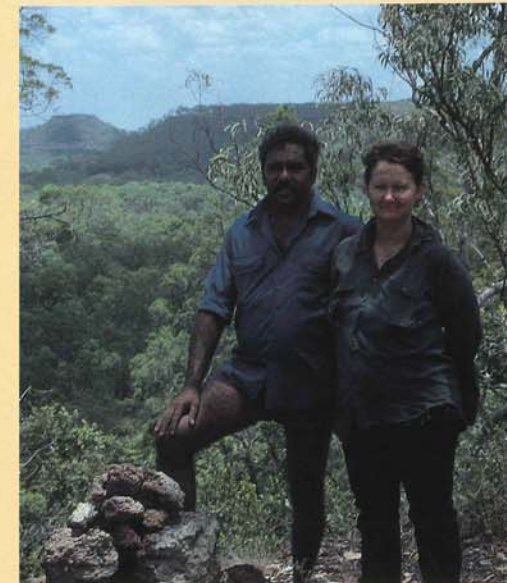
We camped on the escarpment that night, and inevitably talked about Stuart. It was at this point, after two unsuccessful attempts to traverse Australia from south to north, that the explorer finally knew the north coast was within reach.

"I've got a lot of respect for Stuart," Dave reflected, looking down over the gloom below. "To be able to stand here where he looked down from this escarpment, it almost gives me the feeling of being here then ... Of looking through his eyes at what I see now."

Edward Stokes

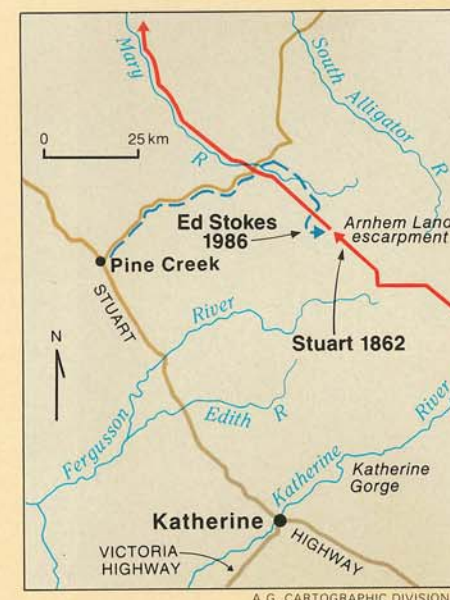


COURTESY MITCHELL LIBRARY OF NSW



Dave Curtis and his wife Penne stand at the small cairn he built when he first located Stuart's lookout on the escarpment. To reach it, Dave hiked along the floor of the gorge in the background.

The map shows the location of "Stuart's view" from the escarpment of the Arnhem Land plateau. Ed reached it by turning off Stuart Highway near Pine Creek.



A. G. CARTOGRAPHIC DIVISION



A minor gem in Australia's grand scheme, for Stuart and his men the north-flowing Strangways was of inestimable value. The party had penetrated only 150 km north of Newcastle Waters in two months, but once on the Strangways the debilitating, time-consuming scouting ended and the entire expedition now rode northwards together. The time saved was critical. Rations were already short, and Stuart's health was failing. "I feel this heavy work much more than I did last year," he wrote at Daly Waters. "I feel my capability of endurance beginning to give way!"

David and I were tiring too, but two days after leaving the Strangways we experienced a powerful tonic: the Roper River, the first flowing water we had seen since leaving the Torrens River in Adelaide.

Stuart crossed the Roper on 27 June 1862, exactly two years after he retreated from Attack Creek, 500 km to the south, on his first expedition. Ironically, after the years spent battling for water there was now too much, and the packhorses bogged in the Roper's deep channels. One drowned horse provided a gastronomic treat, "a delightful change of fresh meat from dry". But despite these new trials, the area's lush beauty and its cheerful Aborigines enlivened the party. "The Roper is a splendid river," Stuart enthused. "The

Stuart reached the Roper on 25 June 1862 and crossed it two days later near here on Moroak station, 40 km east of Elsey station homestead. The lush, pandanus-lined reaches of the river charmed Stuart's party, just as they refreshed Ed Stokes and David May in 1986.

country could not be better, it really is magnificent."

It was easy to understand how the Roper charmed Stuart and his men, its pandanus-lined banks and lily reaches contrasting starkly with the harsh endlessness of Sturt Plains. Stuart first struck the Roper 50 km east of Elsey Station, immortalised in *We of the Never Never*, Mrs Aeneas Gunn's story of outback life. Barry Gunson, Elsey's manager, summed up our feelings for the area with one heartfelt comment: "I'd hate to be running one of those poor bloody stations farther south."

Now riding north-west, Stuart began crossing the Arnhem Land plateau on 2 July, discovering and naming the Katherine River on 8 July. It was tedious, rugged travelling, and knowing it would be impossible to follow his tracks through the maze of hills in our 4WD we drove on to Katherine. There we rendezvoused with Dave Curtis, a Warramunga man, who took us to an unforgettable spot: the precise point on Arnhem Land's western escarpment where

Stuart began his descent to the coastal plains (see box preceding page).

"The view was beautiful," Stuart wrote there on 10 July. "Standing on the edge of the precipice . . . we could see a deep creek, thickly wooded and running on our course." They were now 150 km from the coast, and Stuart realised that the stream below them must lead to the sea.

The party began following the Mary River the next day, which Stuart mistakenly thought to be a branch of the Adelaide River, relishing its tropical vegetation: thick belts of pandanus, soaring cabbage palms and primeval paperbark swamps. The Mary's mosquitoes were less welcome, as they were to us in 1986. "Scarcely one of us has been able to sleep during the night," Stuart wrote on 20 July 1862. "I never found them so bad anywhere, night and day they are at us."

Stuart's anticipation masked his rapidly deteriorating health. Determined not to be prevented from reaching the sea itself, as Burke had



After an early-morning picture-taking session, David and Ed breakfast on a bridge over the placid Mary River. A delayed exposure captures a typical meal on their long transcontinental journey – hurried, with the diners usually harassed by flies.

"So still I could not see which way the current was," wrote Stuart of the Mary River, 70 km south of the north coast (below). He believed he was following the already-known Adelaide River, which is tidal, but the Mary has no direct outlet to the sea.



By the light of a lantern in their camp near Point Stuart, Ed makes his last diary entry after reaching the coast (above). Cleaning camera equipment, recording details of the many photographs and diary writing are daily chores on the expedition – usually completed before bedding down.

This dense coastal forest was the final obstacle in Stuart's path. Crossing the grassy floodplain in the foreground, he heard "the wash of the sea". He cut through the forest and fulfilled his greatest ambition. The cairn that commemorates his epic achievement stands below the large banyan right of centre.



been, he chafed at the final obstacles in his path – billabongs and swamps that necessitated major, time-consuming detours. By nightfall on 22 July the expedition was only 30 km from the sea. However, the unchanging gum forest gave no clue of its proximity, and only Stuart knew precisely how close their goal was.

David and I, camped 50 km from the sea, could hardly believe we had almost crossed Australia. High with anticipation, we tried to imagine the explorers' feelings, but their epic privations humbled us. Comparisons seemed absurd.

Stuart had endured countless disturbed nights taking star sights to calculate their position. Now, on 23 July 1862, weary from incessant travelling, he worked throughout the night – checking and double-checking the party's latitude. In just under six months this man of iron had led his men some 2300 km from Stuart Creek; the coast, he calculated that night, now lay just 13 km to the north . . .



The next day, as so often before, Stuart had the party saddled and travelling by early morning. As they rode due north, the stringybarks and pandanus suddenly opened onto a grassy floodplain. Beyond it Stuart faced a final barrier, a dense wall of trees and creepers.

"Stopped the horses to clear a way," he wrote, "whilst I advanced a few yards onto the beach, and was gratified and delighted to behold the water of the Indian Ocean in Van Diemen Gulf before the party knew anything of its proximity. Thring, who rode in advance of me, called out 'The Sea!' which took them all by surprise ... He had to repeat the call before they fully understood, hearing which they immediately gave three long and hearty cheers ..."

◀ *The sea ... at last the sea! Dawn at Point Stuart, the sun rising over Van Diemen Gulf. Stuart had endured three years of frustration, hardship and suffering to reach this point, yet he could only stay two days. Rations were critically short and every day lost was a threat to the party's survival on its forced return to Adelaide.*



Ed Stokes and David, on the left, at the cairn at Point Stuart, tired after covering over 9000 km in two months. They marvelled at the superb bushmanship and tenacity of Stuart and his men as they blazed their 3000 km route across Australia from Adelaide to the north coast.

The forced march home

THE Union Jack was hoisted near Point Stuart on 25 July 1862, the day after Stuart and his party reached the Indian Ocean. The next day Stuart turned for home. Not a day could be wasted: the horses were failing, the provisions were almost exhausted and the creeks south of the Roper were almost certainly drying.

Everything possible was abandoned to lighten the loads when the Roper was reached in mid-August. Five packhorses had already perished, and the others were "perfect skeletons". Stuart, his legs blackened with scurvy and his eyes dim with ophthalmia (sandy blight), had to be lifted on and off his mount.

Despite his suffering Stuart pushed southwards relentlessly, reaching Attack Creek after some waterless marches on 13 September. "I am very doubtful of my being able to reach the settled districts," he wrote coolly. "Should anything happen to me I keep everything ready for the worst. My plan is finished, and my

journal brought up every night, so that no doubt can be thrown on what I have done."

South of Attack Creek virtually every watercourse was dry. The party was trapped at one waterhole for three weeks while their second-best bushman scouted southwards. Stuart was prostrate. "I get no rest day or night from this terrible gnawing pain," he lamented. "The nights are too long and the days are too long."

The discovery of a soakage freed the expedition, but the Macdonnells' deep waterholes still lay 300 km away. A five-day forced march brought the party close to the range, but the constant riding almost killed Stuart. "I find myself getting weaker and weaker... I am very ill indeed," he scrawled. A stretcher was built to carry him, and on 27 October – within sight of the Macdonnells – he almost died. Four days' recuperation in the range probably saved his life. The men were gaunt too, "cheeks sunken in, eyes without

17	24	11,249	7,963
8	643	2,031	89
...	679	3,478	227
160	15,959	65,402	63
583	879	16,915	1,327
...	279,454	38,577	351

The Advertiser.

ADELAIDE: THURSDAY, JANUARY 22, 1863.

THE STUART DEMONSTRATION.

Wednesday, January 21, 1863, will be one of the memorable days of South Australia. On that day the explorer, JOHN McDONNELL STUART, accompanied by his gallant band of fellow travellers, made his formal entry into the City of Adelaide, after having crossed the continent from the southern to the northern shore. Stuart had arrived in town some time previously, with one or two of his companions—but the formal entry of the whole party—as such—was arranged to take place on Wednesday, and the citizens determined to give them a true South Australian welcome home. The feat accomplished by these brave men is unparalleled; many have attempted it, but none—except Stuart and his party—have achieved it. Burke nearly effected the object, though not quite; but Stuart succeeded completely. It is not, however, merely the fact that Stuart has crossed from shore to shore, which entitles him to be placed amongst the heroes of discovery;—of still greater significance is the fact that he, and he alone, wrested from the interior its long hidden secret. What was the map of Australia in our school days? what was it ten years ago? It was a vast blank, having no line traced upon it, no mark, even

part of the convenience, of marshalling that the proc when we stat five minutes c more in prais Major Mayo, Mr. Compton charged with day's proceedi fairly entitle munity.

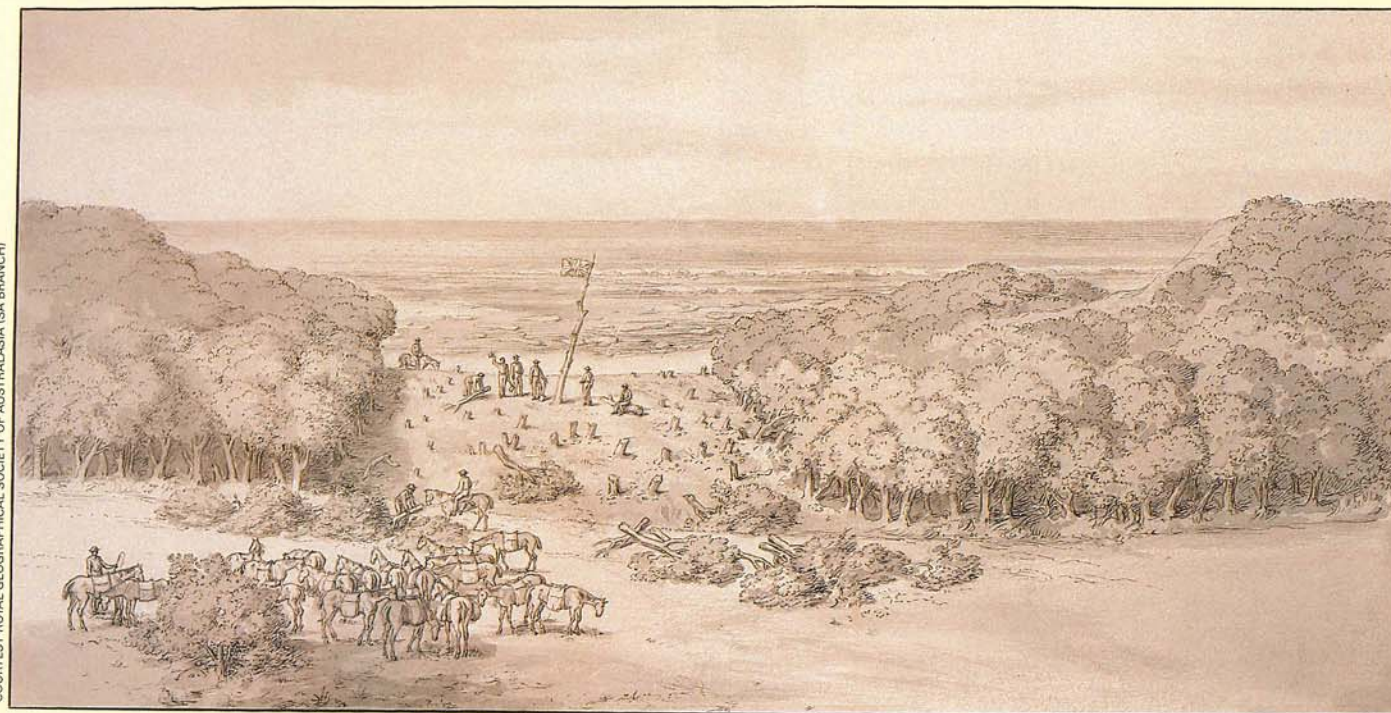
The process
The Ma
The Mayor
The S
The May
The Me
Members
T
Stuart an
T
The Manc
bearing the
ported from R
Flinders' Lod
D.G.M. Sher
T
The Anci
ners of Court
and Persevera
D.P. Worsno
The Lond
banners of t
Highcombe
and D.G.M. V

"These brave men... a feat unparalleled... Burke nearly effected the object but not quite; but Stuart succeeded completely..." The South Australian Advertiser of 22 January 1863, awash in editorial adulation at Stuart's success. The same issue briefly reported a public holiday in Melbourne to honour the dead Burke and Wills.

So ill he could no longer ride, Stuart ordered "a reclining seat" to be made while he rested near the Macdonnell Ranges late in October 1862, after having almost died a few days before. For five of the final six weeks they took to reach Adelaide he rode in what he called "the ambulance" (below, by Annie Billiatt after a sketch by Stephen King).



COURTESY ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALASIA (ISA BRANCH)



COURTESY ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALASIA (ISA BRANCH)

Stuart raises the Union Jack on the shores of Van Diemen Gulf on 25 July 1862, nine months after his main party left Adelaide on his final expedition. Annie Billiatt made this drawing from a sketch by her brother, Stephen King. Less than a metre south of the tree Stuart buried a tin case with a record of the expedition's achievements, concluding: "All well. God save the Queen!" The tin has never been found. The next day Stuart commenced his return, satisfied that "I have done everything in my power to obtain as extensive a knowledge of the country as the strength of my party will allow me."

any expression, voices husky, lips parched."

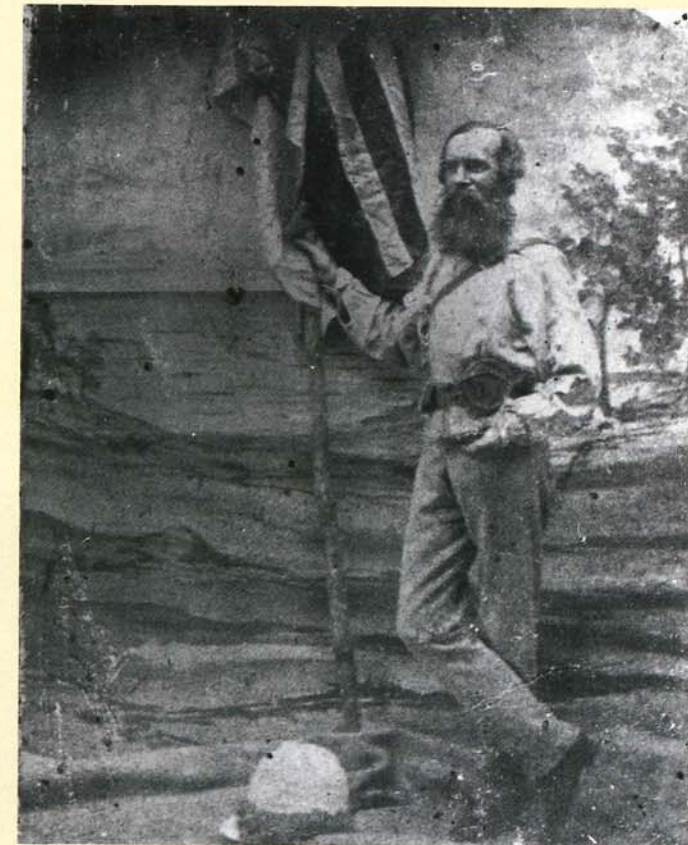
There was barely sufficient water remaining for the expedition south of the Macdonnells, and many of the long-suffering horses were reluctantly abandoned on the last shambling marches to the mound-springs. Stuart Creek was reached early in December 1862. "GREAT JOY, first tracks of a bullock seen," wrote one of the party.

Despite his condition, Stuart

had master-minded the longest forced march in Australian exploration and, though all were emaciated, none of his men was dead. One of them recalled later: "I am quite unnerved when I speak of Stuart. Many a time while retreating I said to him, 'Mr Stuart, you are not fit to travel today.' He replied, 'I must go on. The waters are drying, rations short, the horses knocking up; if I stop all will be lost.'"



AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC wishes to thank Bruce F. Macdonald, Kenneth Peake-Jones and Roger Collier for their assistance in the refereeing of this article. The author thanks R.Gunz/Olympus, Yokohama Tyres and Codan Ltd for their support in providing equipment for his 1986 Stuart expedition.



COURTESY MORTLOCK LIBRARY OF SA

Stuart poses for a formal portrait, in the style of the day, after reaching Adelaide in mid-December 1862. The photograph was probably taken about the time of the Great Stuart Demonstration of 21 January, in which Adelaide gave him a hero's welcome. Stuart had been too ill to attend a public function earlier.