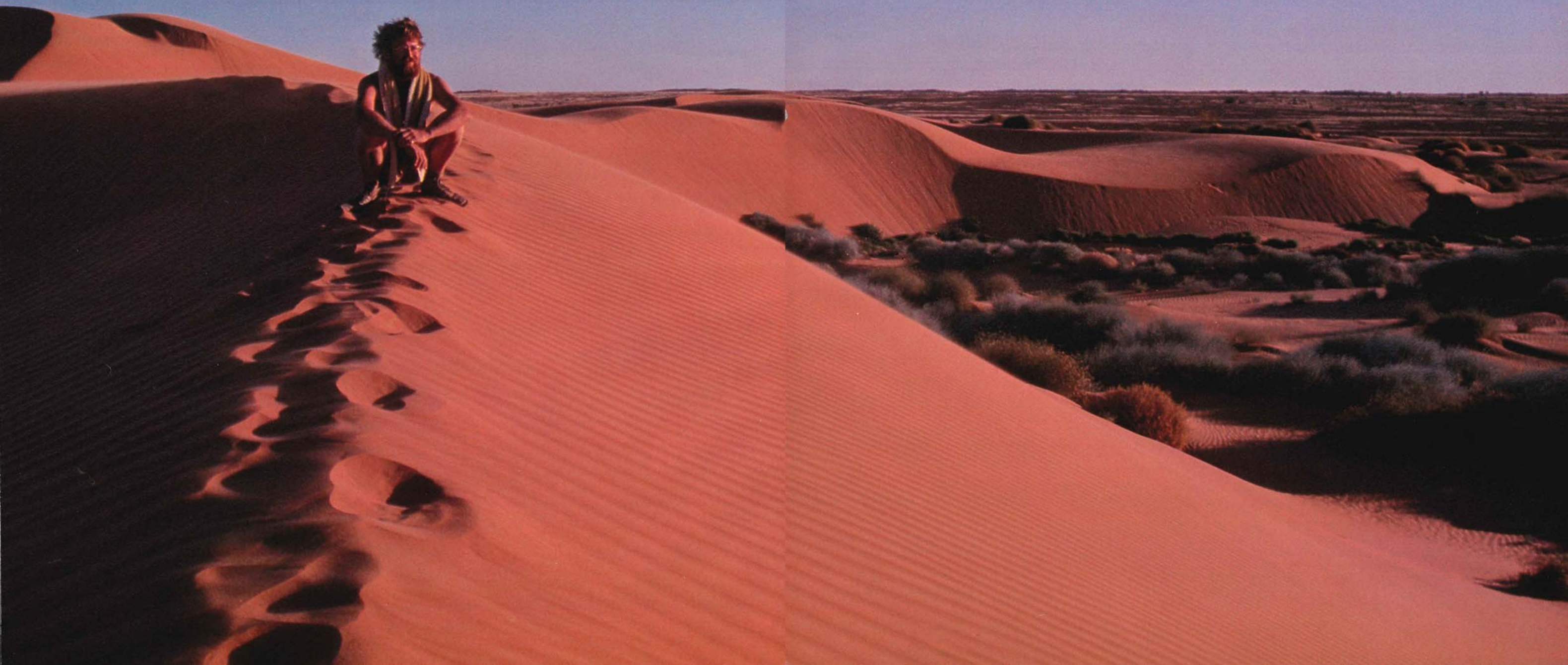

IN
STURT'S FOOTSTEPS

RETRACING CHARLES STURT'S 1844-46 EXPEDITION
TO CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Text and photography by Edward Stokes

Perched on a massive sand peak,
I watched the sun dip below
the grim expanse of the Sturt Stony Desert.
The dunes glowed bright orange,
their shadows lengthening over the sand-polished pebbles,
and a strong wind veiled me in sand.





Sturt's exhausted party trudged these sand ridges 150 km south of Birdsville on the edge of the Sturt Stony Desert while pushing into the interior on 25 August 1845.

I WAS alone, 150 kilometres from the nearest township and an hour's walk from my vehicle. Exhilarated, I savoured a sense of fearful joy.

It was the highpoint of a memorable journey. I was retracing Charles Sturt's Central Australian Expedition of 1844–46, his doomed quest for an inland sea, during which he led his men closer to the centre of Australia than any Europeans before them. Earlier that day two of my tyres had been slashed beyond repair by knife-like stones called gibbers, but my difficulties were nothing compared with Sturt's as he struggled back from the Simpson Desert with four exhausted companions and shambling horses. Harris Browne, the expedition's surgeon, wrote later

A violent dust storm, bathing the world in eerie shades of red, roars through the tiny settlement of Pooncarie on the Darling River, a few kilometres from where Sturt passed in 1844. While teaching Pooncarie's 10 children in 1983 I resolved to research and retrace Sturt's harrowing expedition in search of an inland sea. The inset shows Pooncarie's tiny schoolhouse during the storm and in the foreground the Subaru 4WD I used to follow Sturt's routes.





In the harsh grandeur of the Barrier Range north of Broken Hill, the terrain is too rough even for 4WD vehicles, except on existing tracks. Yet through here Sturt coaxed 15 men, 11 horses, 30 bullocks, four drays, 200 sheep and a boat in November 1844.

The lakes around Menindee, in the far west of NSW, were much shallower when Sturt saw them in October 1844. These days they are dammed and provide recreation as well as water for the people of Menindee and Broken Hill. They were the nearest thing to an inland sea that Sturt found on his expedition.

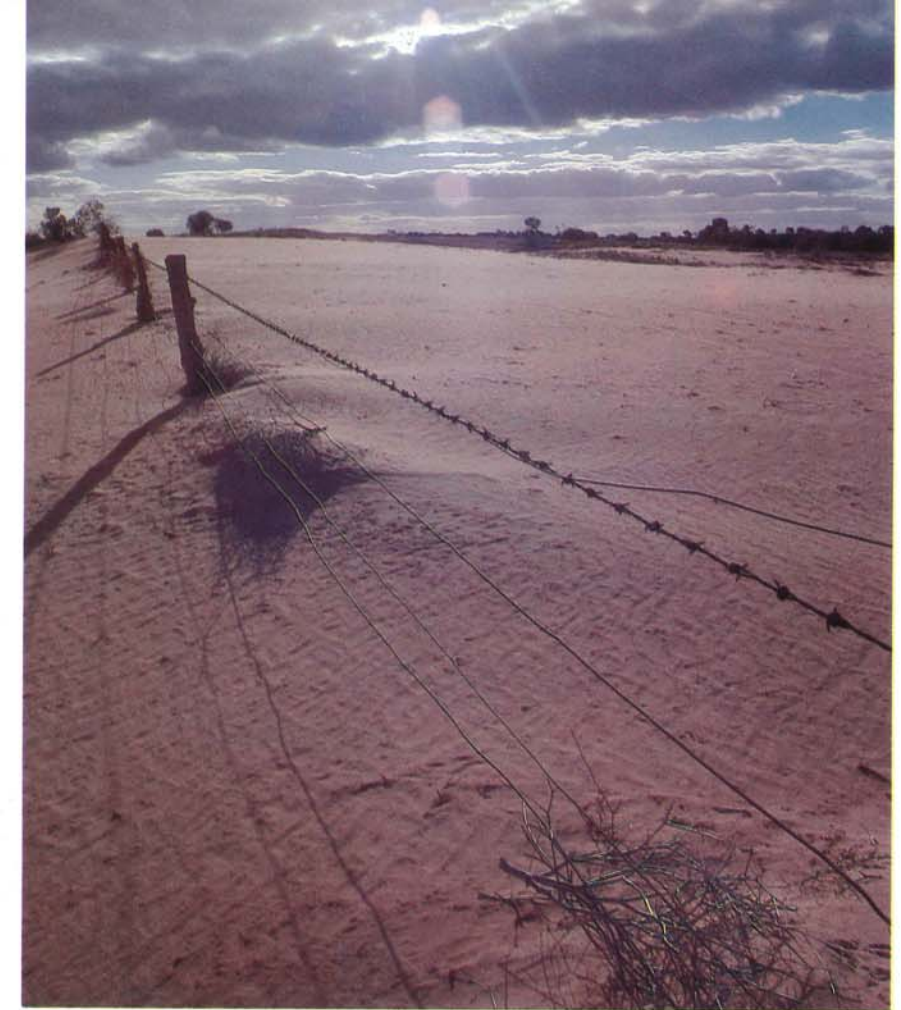


of that desperate retreat: "Mere puddles of water had enabled us to go thus far and we knew a few days would dry them all up. Some we knew would be dry already ... It was just touch and go with us."

I remained on the dune after sunset, ignoring the impulse to reach camp before dark. My thoughts turned to Sturt. Beyond the horizon his grand vision of an inland sea had finally been laid to rest, withered to nothing by the seemingly endless desert. There was a cruel irony in his discoveries: Sturt gave his name not to some central sea but to the wastelands now lost in the gathering gloom.

MY work on Sturt's expedition had begun a year before, at Pooncarie on the Darling River in south-western New South Wales. Sturt passed within kilometres of the site of Pooncarie and during 1983, when I was teaching the area's 10 children, I resolved to research and retrace his last and most harrowing expedition. So, after contented days in our little school, I spent long nights poring over Sturt's *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia* and charting his routes.

Leaving Pooncarie after a year, I



Shifting sand, partly the result of rash overgrazing late in the 19th century, drifts across a station fence. Many of the creeks in which Sturt

found water as he pushed north from Broken Hill are now filled with silt.

Then ... People, horses, carriages and a steam tram in bustling Argent Street in 1902. The clock was installed in the Post Office tower later in the year.

Now ... The lights of modern Broken Hill's Argent Street (from the Latin argentum, meaning silver) stand out against the shapes of the Barrier Range.



BROKEN HILL – The Silver City

Sturt investigated metal-bearing outcrops in the Barrier Range on his march north in November 1844. Legend says he camped by what was later called the "broken hill", where a prolific silver-lead-zinc ore body was found in 1883. In

fact his camp was some 20 km to the north-east. Broken Hill, with a population of about 27,000, is the only large community on Sturt's route, reflecting the harshness of the environment.

began investigating the expedition at the National Library in Canberra in 1984, hoping to uncover clues to Sturt's hidden motives, for his complex nature is well camouflaged in his published accounts.

I originally planned to write a book based on the *Narrative*, but after months of research at the National Library I made an unexpected discovery: a microfilm of the field journal Sturt kept during the expedition. Elated by my find, I decided to structure my book around the journal – and although the original is in England, I obtained permission to use the microfilm.

The journal, far from being a conventional portrait of a leader, reveals Sturt the man: often at odds with himself, tenacious in his hopes although repeatedly rebuffed by the landscape, he struggles onwards, sometimes blindly, and suffers. And with him go his horses, their hardships recorded in his graphic entries:

"Punch must go the day after tomorrow without any water, and how the poor brute will bear it I really do not know for he is panting over me now as I am writing by the light of the moon ..."

SPECULATION that NSW's rivers flowed inland to a central sea dominated much of the early European exploration of Australia. During an expedition in 1828–29 Sturt discovered the Darling River near Bourke. This bolstered his conviction about an inland sea. He persisted in his idea even though he found on a second expedition, in 1829–30, that south-eastern Australia's rivers flowed southwards. By 1844 most colonists doubted that an inland sea existed. Sturt refers to it on several occasions in the *Narrative* and his journal highlights his continuing hopes of discovering it.

However, written evidence gives only part of the story. I became convinced that retracing Sturt's routes and crossing the country he explored was essential to a real understanding of his achievements and failings. Might the landscape have held clues, however scanty, to encourage his unshakeable belief in an inland sea? Or had the Father of Australian Exploration become hopelessly entangled in a web of obsessive self-delusion?

Sturt's route took him from Ade-



laide to the Darling River, up to the sites of present-day Menindee and Broken Hill. From there he pushed on to what he called Depot Glen, near today's Milparinka, then to Fort Grey, from where he made a foray to Lake Blanche, 135 km to the west. Returning to Fort Grey, Sturt pressed on to the north-west and eventually into the Simpson Desert before turning back. After retreating to Fort Grey he made another trek up to the Birdsville area before abandoning his quest.

Sturt's slow-moving expedition included 15 men (two of them

sailors), 11 horses, 30 bullocks, four drays, 200 sheep (for fresh meat) and a boat. One hundred and forty years after Sturt left Adelaide on 10 August 1844, I set out in his footsteps. My transport highlighted the technological gulf between us: Sturt was lucky to cover 30 km a day with his drays (40–60 km without them), but my battered Subaru four-wheel-drive vehicle could take me hundreds and my Flying Doctor transceiver ensured that help was never more than a few hours away. And, where Sturt faced the "ghastly blank", I had cases of maps, many with his routes

marked on them.

I was travelling with a friend, Joanne Livermore, a teacher at Wilcannia. By September 1984 western NSW had recovered from the ravages of drought and when Jo and I followed the Darling it was high and the flats were green – just as Sturt had described them. But some things had changed. On the 250 km stretch between Wentworth and Menindee we saw not a single Aborigine, yet Sturt met bands of them daily along the Darling: "The Natives have no fear of us, and they wander about seeking food just as

An oasis in the arid plains of western NSW, Evelyn Creek flows from Depot Glen where Sturt's expedition languished in 1845 from mid-January to mid-July. Sturt's animals quenched their thirst with up to 5000 litres of water a day, contributing greatly to the fall in the creek's level while the party was there.



A tiny posy adds colour to the tree blazed with the initials of James Poole, who died of scurvy at Depot Glen in July 1845. The tree stands by the spot where he was buried only days after rain had fallen, freeing the expedition. The glen is on Mount Poole Station, a few hundred metres from the homestead.

A fiery dawn breaks over flatlands around Depot Glen, about 15 km from Milparinka. Ignoring the aridity of the terrain around him, Sturt insisted that an inland sea lay only some 250 km to the north-west.



if we were not near ... They seem conscious that we would not injure them, and they sleep at our fires as soundly as at their own."

Sturt displayed the patronising attitudes of his time towards the native people but apart from Edward Eyre, who trudged round the Great Australian Bight with Aboriginal companions in 1841, no other explorer treated them as kindly.

While sitting by the river one evening, I reflected on Sturt's perceptive observation that "the progress of civilised man into an uncivilised region is almost invariably attended with misfortune to its original inhabitants".

AFTER setting up a base camp close to the Darling at Menindee, Sturt made a virtually waterless reconnaissance into the Barrier Range near present-day Broken Hill. Having seen one Aborigine, he wrote hopefully on his return: "Where there are Natives there is water, and where there is water we can go - and it is clear there are Natives beyond where we went."

In fact once Sturt quit the Darling a daily scramble for water began, with the party digging wells to water the stock. When Jo and I left the river we never passed a settlement without taking the precaution of topping up our 100-litre water supply.

From a base camp near Broken Hill, Sturt edged the bullock drays northwards along the Barrier Range, pushing from one precarious water source to the next. We followed his route, digging for water as he had done. Not once did we find water where Sturt had, even though we were travelling in very similar seasonal conditions and were digging holes a metre deep, for the area's creeks were severely silted following rash overgrazing late in the 19th century.

In mid-January 1845 Sturt, already 300 km north-north-west of Menindee and desperate for water, discovered virtually permanent water at what he later called Depot Glen, near today's Milparinka, 265 km north of Broken Hill. But the expedition was trapped there for six months by drought. It was a grim, demoralising period: the creek's water fell steadily, the birds departed, provisions were reduced and scurvy took hold.



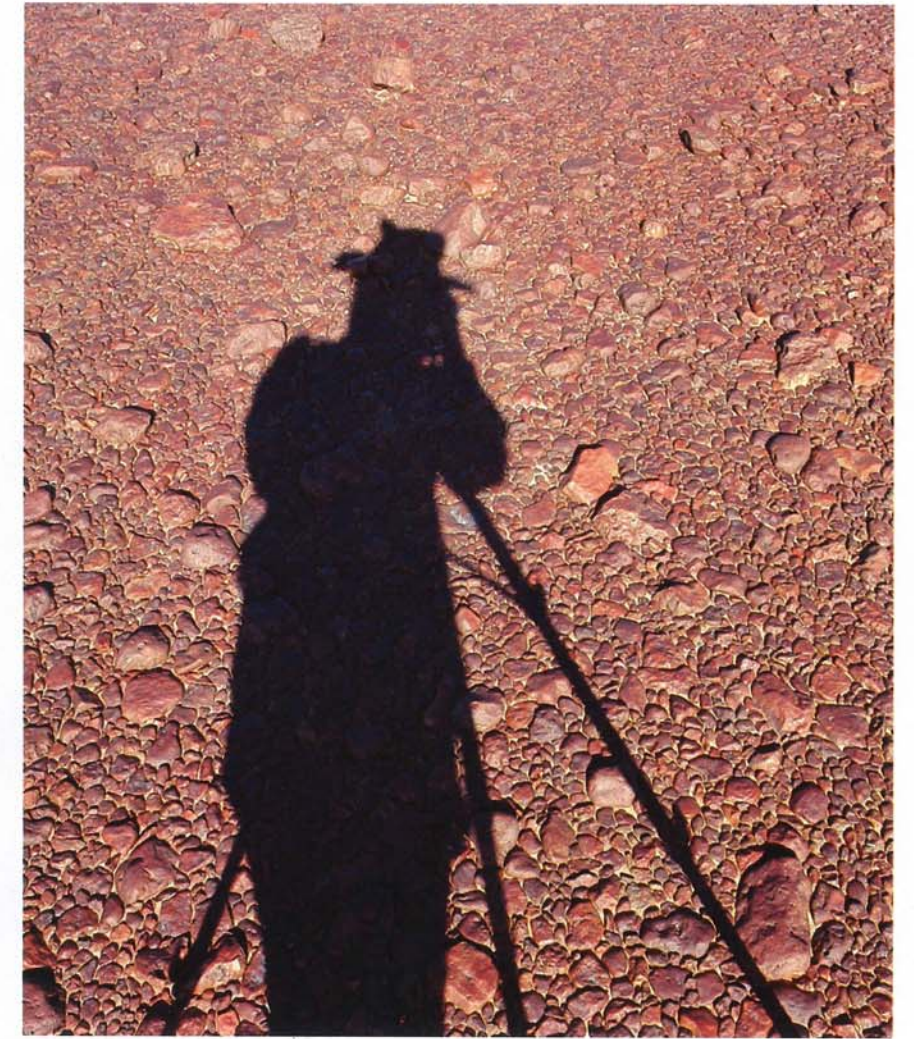
***Bogged** in sand beside Cooper Creek one evening, my Subaru had to wait till the next day to be dug out because I was too tired. Sturt first crossed the Cooper's flood plains and creeks on 20 August 1845, about 100 km west of where Innamincka is today, on his way north-west.*

In June, with his scurvy-ridden deputy, James Poole, close to death, Sturt confided in his journal: "This dreadful detention with its concurrent misfortunes will almost wear me out."

Depot Glen remains the haven Sturt discovered, and Poole's graveside grevillea - blazed "J.P. 1845" by Sturt's men - is one of the few tangible marks of the expedition. Lazing by the life-saving waters, I imagined Sturt's men camped there, whiling away the anxious weeks, as their leader continued to maintain in his journal that an inland sea lay only about 250 km to the north-west.

There was undoubtedly no objective evidence to support his belief,

apart from the probably misinterpreted information given by a lone Aborigine who wandered into the camp one day. Depot Glen is less than 1 km from the Mount Poole Station homestead where the station manager, Luke O'Connor, told me: "We water-ski on a lake 50 km to the south-east. That's the only large body of natural surface water



***A crazy paving of stones** - known as gibbers - in the Sturt Stony Desert forms a backdrop for my shadow. Sturt's horses wore out their shoes and suffered terribly while crossing this surface.*

***Lost in this bewildering maze** of tracks north-west of Moomba, I turned back and made a 700 km detour north to Birdsville and then south to Clifton Hills.*





Severely silted by a combination of flooding and overgrazing of neighbouring land, Eyre Creek, 50 km west of Birdsville, was one of the major permanent watercourses that Sturt relied on in September 1845. Peter Brown (inset), manager of Andrewilla Station near the Goyder Lagoon, gets a welcome splash at a waterhole when we take a break from retracing Sturt's routes.



round here." He added: "But in most years it's dry!"

AHEAD lay bleaker country, and Jo and I had to make a conscious effort to drag ourselves from Depot Glen. Our next goal was Fort Grey, some 90 km away in the north-western corner of NSW. There Sturt established his last base camp after rain freed him from Depot Glen in July. Leaving the drays and the boat at Fort Grey, Sturt struck out west towards Lake Blanche, 135 km away in South Australia. Crossing sand ridge country in which limited visibility had so hampered Sturt, Jo and I found opaque pools lying on the ground after rain. Sturt's party had used similar pools. It was the only surface water I saw in two months, except in large, permanent waterholes or dams. About 20 km east of the lake we camped at Montecollina Bore, a spring bubbling amid white dunes.

This scene is the Climax of Desolation – no trees, no shrubs, all bleak barren undulating sand. Miserable! Horrible!

Sturt doesn't record seeing the spring, but he passed very close to it. The white hummocky dunes, so different from the longitudinal red ones of the surrounding terrain, are remarkably similar to those along

Adelaide's beaches and refreshed his hopes of discovering an inland sea. But Sturt's hopes were dashed on 4 August when he saw Lake Blanche's immense, shimmering basin of sand and salt. It was a moment of supreme disappointment, as Daniel Brock, one of Sturt's men, wrote: "The Captain feels dreadfully chagrined that the lake is dry ... The most sanguine hopes have been entertained that we should float the boat ... but there is barely water to float a duck ... This scene is the Climax of Desolation – no trees, no shrubs, all bleak barren undulating sand. Miserable! Horrible!"

And so it is today. Here was the low point of my journey. As we sat in our forlorn camp among the dunes, all the discomforts of travelling in central Australia seemed magnified: the flies, the ants, the sand-spitting wind, the tiresome punctures.

Even before leaving Lake Blanche's sterile shores Sturt asserted in his journal: "I still confidently expect to find an inland sea to the north-west." His driving belief, I was forced to conclude, flew in the face of the evidence around him.

While Sturt returned to Fort Grey and turned north-west from there with a dray, Jo and I went north from Lake Blanche up Strzelecki Creek, crossing Sturt's path and heading for Innamincka. Jo left me at Innamincka and I went on alone, planning to follow Sturt's route across the Stony Desert using a track I'd been told about earlier. I drove south and then

north-west beyond Moomba but was defeated, "bushed" not by too few tracks but by too many. The area is criss-crossed by a bewildering maze of exploration tracks and seismic "shot lines", most not mapped, and after meeting a lost seismic crew I turned back.

IMADE a 700 km, two-day detour back through Innamincka and up via Cordillo Downs, travelling parallel to Sturt's course and 150 km to the east of it. On reaching Birdsville I headed south to Clifton Hills Station on the Birdsville Track, close to where Sturt had passed.

There I found the track I'd been looking for – little more than wheel ruts – and that evening I slept near the massive sand peak on the edge of the Sturt Stony Desert. The emptiness, space and sense of isolation on the gibber plains were quite eerie. I was exhilarated, but also edgy. As I was travelling alone, my safety rules were rigid. I made daily radio calls to Birdsville and I never left my vehicle without food, water, compass and mirror.

Sturt had no such safety net. In just 12 days his band pushed 300 km north-west from Fort Grey, crossing the lower reaches of Cooper Creek, 100 km west of Innamincka. The men were subsisting on five pounds of flour each a week (for damper), tea, sugar and an occasional bird. They were exhausted, their 10 horses reduced to shambling, and each day brought only fresh disappointments. Sturt was riding almost precisely towards where he believed the inland sea lay, at 138°E, 23°S (see P33). But his dreams were crumbling and, whatever lay ahead, even he accepted that it was not possible to haul the boat, which he had left in Fort Grey, to where his party now was. "The country in truth is not to be understood," he lamented in his journal on the edge of the Stony Desert on 25 August. "No sea, no river, no hills – yet standing we are in Latitude 27°4'2" south and in Longitude 139°15'00" east."

After a day's trek beyond the gib-

A billy after our paths cross ... Birdsville policeman Bob Goad (centre), his father-in-law, Kevin Battaglone (left), and Bedourie policeman Ron van Saan have a morning brew-up.



ber plains the party reached the Goyder Lagoon, the utterly featureless flood plain of the Diamantina River. I jolted across the Goyder with Peter Brown, manager of nearby Andrewilla Station and once a drover. Peter's intimate knowledge of the area and its permanent waterholes confirmed a key section of



Too exhausted to push on to Broken Hill, I camp here for my last night in the bush. The expedition has taken its toll, on both me and my equipment: the Subaru has lost its exhaust pipe, its brakes don't work and the camping table is about to collapse.

The life-giving water of Lake Pinaroo at Fort Grey, site of Sturt's most northerly base camp, is extremely difficult to spot because of the nature of the surrounding terrain. Sturt left his sheep, boat and most of his drays here when he pushed north-west in August 1845.

Although flowering shrubs dotted the sand ridges, the country was becoming increasingly barren as Sturt and his men reached the indigo reaches of Strzelecki Creek on 3 August 1845 ... only to discover that its water was salty and unfit to drink.



Sturt's route, while his knowledge of horses was invaluable. He was convinced Sturt must have been travelling in at least an average season (as his journal indicates but folklore contradicts), and he assured me that pack horses could travel 40 to 60 km a day. However, knowing the area's extremely pot-holed soils, Peter was stunned to learn that Sturt was also hauling a cart. When we reluctantly parted company he was still muttering, "The bloody cart ... That bloody cart's got me beat!"

I HAD my own vehicle worries. I doubted that my Subaru could negotiate the terrain to Sturt's farthest point, some 170 km north-west of Birdsville. Bob Goad, the township's policeman, had offered to get me there. We met by Birdsville's well-known pub and headed north and then west across massive sand ridges towards Eyre Creek, up which Sturt had pushed into the Simpson Desert. In its maze of narrow, cracked channels, close to the ruins of Annandale homestead, Bob located a plaque, placed this century, marking Sturt's camp of 5 September. On 6 August Sturt had written:



This starkly beautiful landscape is part of the scenery around Lake Mungo, which has been listed as a World Heritage site. It lies some 50 km south-east of Pooncarie, near which Sturt passed as he travelled along the Darling River at the beginning and end of his 1844-46 expedition. Aboriginal remains at least 30,000 years old have been found in the vicinity of the lake.



The end of the line for Sturt ... and for me. In these hills, 20 km north of Nappa Merrie, a station on Cooper Creek, Sturt's steely resolve finally broke on 6 November 1845. Because the light isn't right for photography when I reach this spot, I wait in the shade of a tree. I spend the whole day here, pestered by flies and ants. As I look out on the wild, inhospitable beauty around me I reflect on Sturt's great achievement. Driven to this point by a vision of well-watered country in the centre of the continent, he at last came to accept that his dream of an inland sea was just that ... a dream. In his journal Sturt wrote:

I had no hope to whatever quarter I turned my eye – a country utterly impracticable, a creek from which it was vain to expect a supply of water ...

After struggling from Cooper Creek back to Depot Glen, Sturt collapsed, physically and mentally exhausted, suffering from severe scurvy. Although unable to walk, he supervised the expedition's retreat to the Darling between 7 and 20 December 1845.

"We found several puddles at which the birds still water, but they were too thick for the horses to drink and we have halted without any [water] ... We are in a region in which we have not leisure to pause and dare not trifle."

No inland sea had been discovered, but Sturt also yearned to plant the Union Jack at the geographical centre of Australia. His party's plight was desperate but, driven more by an unyielding determination than any surviving hope, he pushed on. Bob and I followed, admiring his fortitude.

Next day we quit Eyre Creek where it swings eastwards and followed Sturt's route north-north-west into waterless country. Bright strips of sand marked the bare crests of the sand ridges, their sides matted with spinifex. Not a bird could be heard in the still heat, and the acacias on the parched flats were either stunted or dead.

At midday, 30 km from Eyre Creek and about 20 km short of Sturt's farthest point, we halted, defeated as much by the futility of continuing as by the jarring terrain. Ahead, Bob knew, lay only more of the same, as Sturt's men – increasingly perturbed by his blind advance – must surely have guessed.

On 7 September, already a day's ride beyond the last foul water, Sturt finally turned back, his mind a turmoil of bitter regret. Describing the scene in the weekly diary he kept for his wife, he wrote: "The scene was awfully fearful, dear Charlotte. A kind of dread came over me as I gazed upon it. It looked like the entrance into Hell. Mr Browne stood horrified. 'Did man,' he exclaimed, 'ever see such a place?!'"

After a harrowing 800 km retreat south to Fort Grey, Sturt, overwhelmed by a sense of failure and against all entreaties, went north again. So, leaving Bob in Birdsville, I drove south to retrace Sturt's last journey from Fort Grey. Resting one day, I noted: "Feel exhausted, despite having done virtually nothing – not even the inclination to read." I sensed how Sturt must have felt when he wrote: "The day has been insufferably hot and the flies an absolute plague. With a multitude of things demanding my attention

it was utterly impossible to do anything ..."

After travelling north-west from Fort Grey, Sturt turned north up Strzelecki Creek, reaching Cooper Creek at a point about 20 km west of where Innamincka is today. Arriving at the permanent water of the Cooper, having crossed its barren surrounds, one experiences a powerful sense of life-amidst-death. Yet the day after reaching it, Sturt quit its magnificent reaches to travel north-west. His decision was astounding. No inland sea beckoned now; a desire to reach 'the centre' must have been his only motive.

But only two weeks later, forced back from the waterless country near Birdsville, Sturt began exploring eastwards along the Cooper. It was a desultory, almost aimless journey; his men and horses were close to collapse, while the almost waterless sand ridges between the Cooper and Fort Grey still had to be recrossed.

On a particularly fly-ridden morning I scrambled into the hills of the St Ann Range 20 km north-east of Nappa Merrie, a station on the Cooper. It was here, on 6 November 1845, that Sturt's steely resolve finally broke: "I had no hope to whatever quarter I turned my eye – a country utterly impracticable ... I determined on returning to the Depot, satisfied that no exertion of mine would enable me to cross the heartless desert in which I was."

As I rested on a hilltop that afternoon, Sturt's heroic stature loomed large, for, although retracing his expedition had exposed flaws and shortcomings, it had also increased my appreciation of his achievement. The contrasts between our two journeys sprang to mind: Sturt had taken 15 months to reach this point; I had taken less than three. He turned back racked with scurvy and close to death, while I was returning fitter than before. And, where I was well satisfied, my task accomplished, Sturt turned homewards burdened with deep regrets. A wistful sentence, written later and recalling his final act at Depot Glen before he retreated to the Darling, sums up Sturt's bitter sense of failure: "The boat was launched upon the creek, which I vainly hoped would have ploughed the waters of a central sea."



Sturt's desperate retreat from the Birdsville area in October 1845 is idealistically depicted in this painting by Ivor Hele. Entitled Sturt's Reluctant Decision to Return, the painting won the Commonwealth Art Prize in 1938 and now hangs in Parliament House in Canberra.

This was the end of Sturt's second fruitless push towards the centre. He had already gone farther into the interior in September and, though forced to return to his base camp at Fort Grey, went northwards again despite the entreaties of his party.

AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC would like to thank the Charles Sturt Memorial Museum Trust Inc. for their assistance with this article. The photograph of Ivor Hele's painting is used with the permission of the President of the Senate, the Hon. D. McClelland, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mrs Joan Child. Referee: Roger Collier.