

John McDouall Stuart and the great North Road

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A journey of significance

As the first step towards connecting the colonies of Australia with the world, the crossing of the Australian centre by John McDouall Stuart is of international cultural significance. Not only was Stuart's track to be followed by the Overland Telegraph, vastly improving the Australian colonies' communications with Europe, but its formation was also profoundly influenced by events on the world stage and culturally determined, even as the route itself was physically defined by the continent's geography. The completion of this 'immense task, anxiously awaited by the world and by Science',¹ exerted its own influence, and to this day continues to have social, political and economic relevance in Australia.

When the significance of Stuart's track is assessed from the viewpoint that 'No man is an Island, intire of it selfe',² it becomes clear that the route was not only formed by Stuart, but also by the era in which he lived. To review the many European cultural factors encompassed by the formation of this route it is necessary to understand Stuart as a man of his time, influenced by events and environment, in the context of social, political, and trade factors evident in the Australian colonies and in England, America, Europe, and India. These were the external driving forces that defined the formation of a route from sea to sea - the great North Road.

International links to South Australia and Stuart's explorations

As part of Britain's Empire the Australian colonies were linked to Europe, India, America and Africa. Historically England's links to other countries existed through the monarchy and religion, between scientific communities, via the trade connections of the Empire and its interests and conflicts, wars and treaties. Although geographically distant the effects of these were evident in Australia.

In 1714 the Elector of Hanover was proclaimed King of England. Ascending the English throne as George I, he commenced the close association between England and Hanover which followed through the reign of George II, III, IV, and William IV. When the niece of William IV, Victoria, became Queen of England the Salic inheritance laws denied her the crown of Hanover, and this passed to her uncle, the Duke of Cumberland.³ In this context it is not surprising to find many Germans associated with Britain's colonisation of Australia, not only due to the religious freedom South Australia offered. Information on travels in South Australia were published in German, and discoveries of scientific interest such as Stuart's explorations were translated into German.⁴

As early as April 1836 William Finke, a German whose family resided in the Kingdom of Hanover, is mentioned as dining in London at Edward Gibbon Wakefield's in the company of many people who were significant in the development

of South Australia.⁵ Soon after this Finke, who was later to sponsor Stuart's exploration, arrived in the new Colony. The Bavarian botanist and artist Joseph Franz Albert Herrgott,⁶ was associated with explorations in South Australia including an early expedition of Stuart's where specimens collected were sent to Dr. Frederick von Mueller in Melbourne. Dr. Mueller first emigrated to South Australia for health reasons and because of his interest in botany, and collected specimens from around South Australia including the Lake Torrens area before moving to Melbourne.⁷ His presentation to the Philosophical Institute of Victoria, commenting on the importance of plants collected on Stuart's early expeditions, was republished in German.⁸ Following Stuart's successful crossing of Australia information from German publications on this and other Australian explorations also appeared in French publications.⁹

As France contemplated colonial expansion, voyages of discovery examined Australia, and on 30 March 1772 possession was taken of western Australia in the name of the French King.¹⁰ Although scientific work to locate a suitable site in Australia for a French colony progressed, Britain subsequently occupied western Australia, and France looked elsewhere. When Britain claimed the entire Australian continent on 2 May 1829 due to concern, however unfounded, about French intentions, this heralded the abandonment of the north coast just as success appeared imminent.

Plans for connecting the British Empire with India, Singapore, China and Australia raised the issue of a Telegraph route via the north coast of Australia. Britain joining the war against Russia caused concern for defence of the Australian colonies with their unprotected northern shores, and the India Mutiny increased interest in establishing an overland route to Australia's north coast for supplying remounts to the British Army. In avoiding the dangerous passage of the Torres Strait a shortened voyage reduced potential stock losses, and from South Australia prevailing winds made the sea route to the west impracticable during most of the year.

Following the advent of self-government, the proposed extension of the electric telegraph to Australia resulted in reports to South Australia's Parliament outlining possible alternatives. By 1859 the route from Timor via Australia's north coast, overland to Adelaide had 'naturally enough' obtained support in South Australia, due to the explorations of Babbage, Stuart and Warburton.¹¹ South Australia's Superintendent of Telegraphs, Charles Todd, had discussions with these men and believed that an overland route would be found.

An overland route to the north coast from South Australia for supplying India with horses and other stock made good business sense for James and John Chambers. They had widespread pastoral interests, imported bloodstock from England, and bred the 'C-half-circle' horses provided from Cobdogla Station on the Murray River for Stuart's expeditions. In addition to general associations, Stuart had several family connections with India. His brother, Andrew, became a surgeon in the Bengal Army; his sister, Mary, married a doctor who served in India from 1821 until 1852, and his sister, Caroline, married a man who was to be decorated with the Victoria Cross for his service in the India Mutiny, and who had previously served in the wars in south Africa.¹²

In 1858 the British Government sent Scottish explorer David Livingstone to lead an official exploration of Africa's Zambezi River, investigating possibilities for settlement and cotton cultivation. In searching for alternative supplies of cotton Britain was acting to protect an important industry.¹³ In England cotton manufacture was a great national interest by 1800 and Lancashire mills sourced raw material from America, until the long foreshadowed Civil war (1861-65) resulted in a cotton famine. Forced closure of the mills followed, and it was not until after Stuart's return from his final expedition that some American cotton was again reaching Lancashire.

The crucial role of routes and communication in Australia's north

Despite the many voyages which had touched along the western and northern coasts of Australia over preceding centuries, permanent settlement was not maintained by the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, French, Malay, or English. In assessing the history of Britain's failed attempts to permanently settle Australia's north coast in the nineteenth century, critical factors are evident against a background of ill-founded, poorly-timed decisions, and misfortunes. Geographically remote locations and failure to rapidly establish trade resulted in isolation from shipping routes and, in the absence of an easily traversed overland route, a fatal lack of communication.

By this time Britain was an increasingly industrialised nation, with transport canals constructed throughout much of England, a growing rail network and a comparatively closely settled population.¹⁴ Delivery of mail within England was relatively fast, reliable and cheap with free postage for newspapers, and a variety of methods exploited to communicate free messages.¹⁵ The isolation of outposts on Australia's north coast was in stark contrast to this - ships seized by pirates never returned, and relief was long awaited. The lack of reliable, regular communication was to beleaguer successive British settlements, figuring as a despairing refrain in official despatches and private letters,¹⁶ and creating staffing difficulties.

At Port Essington on the 20 September 1824 the British extended their claim of Australian territory from 135° to 129° East of Greenwich,¹⁷ and by 1850 successive military outposts at Fort Dundas (Melville Island), Fort Wellington (Raffles Bay) and Fort Victoria (Port Essington) had been vacated. Despite the imminent success of Raffles Bay, the decision to establish settlement at Swan River offered shipping trade with the East Indies located closer to the mail route between England and Sydney. A subsequent settlement at Port Essington failed despite Ludwig Leichhardt exploring an overland route from Moreton Bay, and although surveys by the *Beagle* placed the Victoria and Adelaide rivers on British maps, the subsequent exploration of Gregory along the Victoria River did not solve the question of the inland sea, or result in permanent settlement.

Based mainly on perceived trade opportunities which had been noted decades earlier by Captain Matthew Flinders, Britain also occupied the region for strategic reasons, to prevent other nations from forming settlements.¹⁸ However, from a strategic perspective, settlement of the north coast afforded little protection in defence of the southern colonies without the ability to both warn of impending threats and to requisition aid in repelling such threats if they arose. Although Stuart's exploration proved an overland route traversable at any season, this in itself did not secure

European settlement of the north. However, it was a crucial precursor to South Australia's winning the Overland Telegraph, which did secure settlement.

Bound for South Australia

John McDouall Stuart was born on 7 September 1815 in the Scottish port of Dysart, Fifeshire, north of Edinburgh across the Firth of Forth.¹⁹ He was one of six surviving children of William Stuart, an ex-Army officer, and Mary McDouall of Logan, Wigtownshire.²⁰ From approximately 1813 onwards William Stuart was a Customs Officer in Dysart, and although the port had declined from its once thriving trade with the Netherlands, the Stuart children would have witnessed arrivals and departures of ships busily engaged in the coastal trade. The Stuart boys, who attended Edinburgh's Scottish Naval and Military Academy, were studying in Edinburgh when their parents died; before embarking for South Australia John McDouall Stuart passed as a Civil Engineer. Stuart was not alone in being orphaned at a young age. The Englishman James Chambers, who was to sponsor Stuart's crossing of Australia, also lost both parents before emigrating to South Australia.

Of the many Scots to emigrate, Landsborough, McKinlay and Stuart were all to be associated with traversing the continent of Australia. Seven months prior to Stuart's departure articles appeared in Scotland's *Stirling Observer* expounding the superiority of emigration to the Colony of South Australia over Canada and the United States; noting that the *Chambers Journal* and *Scotsman* were lately encouraging emigration; and stating that Scotland ought to know more of South Australia and have more ships sailing thence from its ports.²¹

Given Stirling's proximity to Dysart and Edinburgh, Stuart would have been aware of information from this source, as well as from increasing discussion. He was also personally acquainted with a young man taking passage to South Australia²² and on 13 September 1838, John McDouall Stuart sailed from Dundee, bound for South Australia via Pernambuco, aboard the barque *Indus*, on this ship's first voyage. On 17 January 1839 the *Indus* anchored in Holdfast Bay and, going ashore, Stuart stood on South Australian soil for the first time.²³

To the Centre

Stuart's employment as draughtsman and surveyor on Captain Sturt's expedition (1844-6) associated him with the goal of reaching the centre of Australia, and he experienced the Interior's harsh conditions and the dreadful disease of scurvy. To recover his health Stuart relocated to Eyre's Peninsula, surveying various pastoral leases on Eyre's Peninsula, and employed by James Sinclair who had been a fellow-passenger on the *Indus*.²⁴ William Finke is known to have spent time in the Port Lincoln district, with Finke and Stuart contributing to the same Church fund.

In the early 1850s the rush to Victorian goldfields had a detrimental impact on South Australia. In July 1854 a presentation on exploration of the northern region, to Adelaide's Philosophical Society, resulted in recommendations to the Governor urging financial support for exploration to encourage development of South Australia's

resources. By the mid-1850s investors such as James and John Chambers and Finke were looking northwards.

In 1854 a serious accident in Adelaide hospitalised Finke with a broken ankle.²⁵ Since Stuart was surveying for Chambers and Finke by 1855, Finke's accident may have contributed to Stuart being asked to go exploring.²⁶ Finke and Chambers were business partners and close friends and a relationship was established which resulted in Chambers' providing support for Stuart's explorations as they searched for new pastoral and mineral leases and, ultimately, a route through the Centre to the north coast.

Being a great reader and an educated man, Stuart would have been aware of news pertaining to the Home Country and its Empire. Stuart's experience as a surveyor in South Australia's remote areas contributed to his awareness of the great problem of the Centre of Australia and the question of who would succeed in crossing the continent from sea to sea.²⁷ At a time when a northern route was of great importance to South Australia, Stuart's belief that this was an achievable task led to his resolve to 'make it the great aim' of his life. Stuart relates the self-imposed training he then undertook, deliberately making two preliminary expeditions near Lake Torrens, preparing himself mentally and physically. During this process Herrgott discovered the first of the mound springs, of importance in crossing South Australia's dry north.

James Chambers' letters to England chronicle his own progression from pastoralist to patron.²⁸ Chambers expectantly observes the progress of Government exploration (Aug. 1857); comments on the importance of British armies in India (Nov. 1857); reports his surveyor's discovery of a new country (Nov. 1858) enabling him to acquire 15,000 miles; states that he is exploring the Interior (July 1859), and hopes the Flag of England will be placed in Australia's centre (Sep. 1861). Chambers also mentions the railway (June 1861), and that a railway was necessary in the development of mining interests held in South Australia's northern Flinders Ranges.

With intriguing references, Chambers' letters indicate Stuart's gradual progression through 'surveyor' (1858), 'Surveyor' (1860), 'explorer' (June 1861) to 'Explorer' (Sept 1861) as he is 'promoted' to a position of prime importance. Chambers' initial intention to foster employment and trade to the benefit of England is augmented by his desire to do something in return for his own good fortune, eventually becoming a task which must be finished.

Apart from association with Finke and Chambers, another influence upon Stuart was his membership of South Australia's Lodge of Truth, with its principles of a broader intellectual outlook, moral and social obligations and fraternal support. Governor MacDonnell was said to be keenly interested in Craft Masonry, and surveyors Freeling and Goyder were also members of the Lodge of Truth.

From sea to sea

The paramount importance of the English mails is recorded in colonists' diaries, with arrivals and departures noted for this vital link with family, friends and business. Prior to Stuart's explorations, proposed changes to the Ocean Postal Service intended

bypassing South Australia and carrying the English mails direct to Melbourne. South Australia's Legislature voted unanimously to reject contribution to schemes carrying its Mail past the Colony. In 1860 alteration to the mail service, direct from Ceylon to King George Sound and then to Melbourne, resulted in South Australia taking action against the 'injustice of carrying our mails past'.²⁹ This sharp lesson can only have contributed to a determination to have the Overland Telegraph connected via Adelaide, and for this Stuart's track was crucial.

The course of John McDouall Stuart's final expedition was directly influenced by information about the north coast. Stuart repeatedly aimed to intersect with Gregory's previous exploration along the Victoria or to reach the Gulf of Carpentaria, with determined but unrewarded efforts. Defeated, Stuart returned to Adelaide where his published statements of being prepared to cross with 500 horses prompted a recommendation from a *Beagle* survey member, Frank Helpman, offering his opinion of the preferable nature of the Adelaide River.³⁰ Helpman's unfavourable report of the Victoria River in comparison to the Adelaide was received prior to Stuart's departure. In directing the expedition's efforts in a more northerly direction instead of trying to reach the Victoria, Stuart achieved the success which had hitherto eluded him, passed the scrub barrier and reached the north coast.

In light of contentions which occurred in the Australian colonies over the relative merits of different explorers it is interesting to examine a French perspective of the crossing of the Australian continent. No fine distinction was drawn for Burke & Wills and McKinlay failing to reach the sea, and the French order of precedence for traversing the Australian continent places Stuart fourth after Burke and Wills, 1860-61 (first), McKinlay, 1861-62 (second), and Landsborough, 1862 (third).³¹

What then sets Stuart's route apart? The Gulf of Carpentaria did not offer ready access to shipping lanes, therefore lessening the importance of routes traversed by Burke and Wills, McKinlay and Landsborough. As a surveyor Stuart kept a precise record and fixed positions carefully throughout his explorations. His examination of a route through the centre obtained information which was specifically relevant to the establishment of a telegraph line and to pastoral activities, including assessment of the terrain, water, stock feed and timber supplies. Stuart thought constantly of the telegraph and effectively completed a feasibility study for the establishment of the Overland Telegraph in forming the route which provided the basis upon which South Australia claimed the northern territory.³²

Arguments that settlement of the north was most likely to be swiftly effected from South Australia rather than Queensland, resulted in the northern territory being annexed to South Australia, which led to this Colony establishing the Overland Telegraph, which in turn secured otherwise precarious settlement. As a reprise on the experience of European occupation of the north prior to the advent of the Telegraph John Bennett, of the 1865 South Australian Government Survey, wrote of the monotony, long awaited letters and news, and the dismal watch for a tardy vessel.³³ Following the colonial expansion of Wakefield's time, anti-imperialist attitudes prevailed in Britain for many years, until political changes and commercial factors resulted in a new interest in British colonialism (1867-70),³⁴ and the Telegraph was finally extended to Australia.

Conclusion

The geographical nature of Australia's centre was of world interest and 'until Stuart's task was finished the map did not know what to tell about Australia'.³⁵ John McDouall Stuart's progressive charting of a route from South Australia to the Centre, and Elizabeth (Chambers) Bay on the north coast debunked the long debated theory of an inland sea. His discoveries were claimed to be of 'vast moment' which would 'doubtless be hailed with delight at home and throughout the civilised globe'.³⁶ Geographical information from earlier surveys, occupations and explorations of northern Australia underpinned Stuart's endeavours, as he strove to bridge the uncharted regions, and his route was determined by features and formations of the areas traversed, prior knowledge of the north coast, and the limitations of men, horses and equipment.

These explorations traversed a route of strategic importance and subsequently altered the history of a continent, its colonies, and the Empire which claimed it. The astonishing journeys Stuart accomplished with horses are feats which echo down the years, with South Australia's annexation of western and northern areas and the settlement of Darwin; expansion of pastoral activities and stations into the north and the subsequent importation and breeding of camels; establishment of the Overland Telegraph and its stations, commencement of the Great Northern Railway, and the Stuart Highway. Even in assessing South Australia's participation in the Federation of Australia, the importance placed on the role of the Overland Telegraph in connecting the continent leads inexorably back to the contribution of John McDouall Stuart.

There is no true measure of the cultural loss that these events encompassed. As a most regrettable aspect of this topic, Stuart was imbued with the expansionist beliefs of the British national culture and colonial attitudes of the time which increasingly demanded development of new areas and resources. The significance and fragility of these areas was not recognised nor understood. In opening up the northern regions to Europeans years in advance of what would otherwise have been achieved an environmental and cultural impact was accelerated, however this access was sought much earlier and long denied.

Opportunities exist to enable the cultural journey that tracks such as these represent to be experienced without causing further damage. For example, Stuart's crossing of the continent is closely linked with Adelaide's Treasury Building (Government Offices), and exhibits such as its Exploration, Surveying and Land Heritage Museum offer access to these aspects of our history in a venue that is accessible, relevant, and educational whilst minimising impact to the environment. Heritage conservation and adaptation of sites such as these, in accordance with the principles of the Burra Charter, can press into valuable service under-utilised buildings which echo with the footsteps of our past, and fulfil a vital and functional role in optimising conservation of historic environments.

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