



The monument to the Burke & Wills Expedition in the Bendigo Cemetery

Mr William John WILLS

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The melancholy end of William John Wills has sorrowed the heart or clouded the brow of every individual among the host of acquaintances whose esteem and regard he had won for himself since his arrival in this colony. All that could be reasonably honed for from the exercise of the most reliable energy, perseverance, spirited enterprise, and enthusiastic devotion to science, which were combined in the lamented subject of this brief memoir, has now perished.

William John Wills, the second in command of the unfortunate Exploring Expedition, whose triumphs and calamities we have already recorded, had but reached his seven-and-twentieth year.

He arrived in this colony in January, 1853, by the Janet Mitchell. His father was a physician at Totness, in Devonshire, and the hero of this memoir was designed to pursue the study of the same profession. With this object, in view, young Wills followed with ardor, as a pupil of his father, the attainment of the various branches of knowledge required in this profession, and for four years exhibited the most unremitting application to such studies. In chemistry and the experience of the medical schools he became specially distinguished for proficiency.

This unceasing thirst for information on all topics being so restlessly exhibited might have excited fears that the student's health would have given way. Young Wills had received an excellent academical education at the grammar school of Ashburton, a public school of note, as being endowed with scholarships by the famous William Gifford, and also by Dr Ireland, Dean of Westminster. Professor Babbage, the mathematician, and inventor of the calculating machine, is among the celebrities who have reflected honour on this town as their birthplace.

A first cousin of Mr Wills appears to have shared his courage and enterprise, and devotion to science, for Lieut. Le Vescompte, the gentleman referred to, accompanied Sir John Franklin on the fatal expedition to the Arctic regions, and his honourable death is, with that of his gallant leader, now a matter of history. It may not be uninteresting to mention as an illustration of Mr Wills' fondness for the general acquisition of knowledge, that the captain of the ship in which he sailed to this colony states that his active minded passenger devoted himself upon the voyage to the acquirement of a thorough knowledge of the science of navigation.

On Mr Wills reaching this colony, to which he had turned his steps mainly from perceiving the broad field for enterprise and discovery which it presented, he obtained an early engagement on the Royal Bank Station at Deniliquin, though by no means necessitated to such a step. His father followed to this country in the same year, and succeeded in discovering his son (and such discoveries were sometimes difficult at that period) by the instrumentality of the late Dr Maund, who had been a fellow-passenger with young Mr Wills in the Janet Mitchell. Dr Wills settled at Ballarat, where his son William assisted him for a short time in his profession.

Subsequently the subject of this memoir obtained employment in the service of the Government as an officer in the Survey Department, under Mr Byerley, and there displayed his characteristic assiduity and proficiency. Having acquired a knowledge of and interest in astronomical and other sciences, to which the Observatory is devoted, he obtained, through the recommendation of Mr Ligar, the Surveyor General, a situation as assistant in that establishment. Here he could cultivate his favourite studies, especially that of astronomy, in which, he had been trained and encouraged by his father.

Here he remained for two years, when the opportunity presented itself of offering to join the Exploring Expedition. This undertaking he was prepared to expect would have occupied him for three years, and it was entered upon at a considerable pecuniary sacrifice. It has been stated also, and, we believe, very correctly, that Mr Wills expended a considerable sum on new instruments and peculiar requirements for the work before him. So long ago as 1855 he frequently spoke, as many of his friends can recollect, of a longing desire to explore the interior of Australia. He also expressed at this time a belief that he should be among the first who ever should succeed in crossing to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

In 1856 there was a proposal brought before the public by a Dr Catherwood to explore the interior of this country. This project, however, was abandoned; but young Wills, who happened to be then on the River Wannon, immediately on chancing to hear of it, walked to Ballarat, a distance of ninety miles, in his anxiety to join the proposed expedition.

The varied and extensive attainments of Mr Wills, his many excellent qualifications, of special value to anybody engaging in the arduous and perilous duties of an explorer, rendered his co-operation with the gallant Burke most gratifying to all who were warmly anxious for the success of the expedition. Nobly, though mournfully for ourselves, has he terminated an irreproachable career of usefulness; and if any feeling can arise to mitigate our regret for his loss, we must seek it in the satisfaction with which we record his character of high honour, devotion to duty, sterling attainments and unselfish patriotism.

The following is an extract from a letter addressed by Mr Wills to his sister in England, immediately after his return from the excursion which eventuated in the loss of the three camels: -

"Cooper's Creek, December 11, 1860.

"My Dear Bessy,- This will probably be the last opportunity I shall have to write you before I return, and I will take the opportunity, to do so. You must excuse this being written in pencil; it is troublesome writing in ink, it dries up so confoundedly fast. I enclose you some seeds from the Australian desert. Tell mama she must excuse me writing her.

She must read this, and fancy it's hers also. I have not even time to write my father. The journey has hitherto been but as a picnic party, but I fear we shall have some heavier work soon; I have had a slight specimen of it lately. I went out for a few days to explore the country to the north-east, accompanied by one man and two camels. I had left the man in charge of the camels while I went to make some observations; when I returned I found the man had allowed the camels to stray. I tracked them for some distance, but I found that they had gone homeward. There was nothing for it but to walk back. So we started at 7 am next day.

After walking about ten miles, we fortunately found some water, and we continued on until 11 a.m. We then rested, as it's trying to travel with the heat at 130 in the sun and 112 in the shade. So we started again at 4 pm, and continued until 11 pm. Started again at 4 am and walked until 11 am rested until 3 pm walked again until 11 p.m. Started at 4 a.m. and got into the camp a little before 9 am; thus walking, more than 80 miles in less than fifty hours, including stoppages. It's astonishing how a walk like this gives one a relish for a drink of water. For water such as you would not even taste, one smack's their lips as if it were a glass of sherry or champagne. We had but half a pint between us for the last twelve miles. We have no idea

of being out for three years as I supposed. I calculate on being in Melbourne in August at furthest."

On the 15th of December, the following is added: -

Dear Bessy, - I have just returned from fishing up the camels' saddles. I have been more fortunate this time, and have not lost my camels. I start tomorrow for Eyre's Creek, on our way to the Gulf of Carpentaria." The two camels mentioned were those which found their way to South Australia.

WILLIAM JOHN WILLS
Second in Command
Died also near Coopers Creek.
29th June 1861





Compiled by Pat & Ian Belmont
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