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Charles Sturt

More than just an explorer

at the archives



Wayne Doubleday

The majority of people would be aware that Charles Sturt University was named after the famed explorer Captain Charles Sturt (1795-1869) who navigated his way through this area and along the banks of the Murrumbidgee River on one of his several expeditions. But what do we know about the man himself? What motivated him to take on these challenges? What type of man was he?

Charles Sturt was born in India on April 28, 1795, though he returned to England at a very young age to begin his education.

Later in 1813, after it became apparent that his family did not have the finances to send him to university, he received a commission as ensign in the 39th Regiment (with the help of his aunt who petitioned the Prince Regent).

Sturt saw active service in the Pyrenees during the latter stages of the Peninsular War, fought in Canada against the Americans, and returned to Europe a few days after the Battle of Waterloo.

He then spent time in the occupation forces in France, and later in Ireland on garrison duties. By December 1825 Sturt had risen to the rank of Captain, and travelled with his regiment to New South Wales arriving in Sydney in May 1827.

After his arrival in the colony, Sturt was appointed to the position of military secretary to Governor Darling.

Through this position Sturt was able to meet and talk with other prominent explorers including John Oxley, Hamilton Hume and Alan Cunningham.

These conversations intrigued Sturt who then began offering his services to lead expeditions into the vast unknown areas of the colony still unexplored.

While many of Charles Sturt's exploits as an explorer are well known, his motivation behind these expeditions is often neglected. Sturt was fascinated by the great unknown and the mysteries of Australian geography, particularly the mythical inland sea, which he longed for the honour of discovering.

His first expedition in November 1828 set out to track the course of the Macquarie River. What he succeeded in doing was to discover the Darling River system.

Sturt's second and better-known expedition in November 1829, was an investigation of the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee River systems previously discovered by Oxley. This trip led Sturt past the current site of Wagga following the Murrumbidgee River, to the Murray River and eventually Lake Alexandrina and the southern coast of Australia.

Despite some difficulties on the return trip to Sydney, the group finally returned in May 1830. Many years later in August 1844 Sturt, by then residing in Adelaide, made his final foray in exploration with a failed attempt to locate the inland sea in the interior of South Australia.

Reputed by the sand dunes of the Simpson Desert he at last reluctantly abandoned the idea of an inland sea.

Charles Sturt was said to be "...a tall thin man, with bright blue eyes and a prominent nose."

While remembered predominantly for his career as an explorer, soldier and public servant, Sturt was a humanitarian whose "...capacity for arousing and retaining affection was remarkable". He earned the respect and liking of his men and expedition companions through courtesy, respect for their well-being and compassion towards all men.

Sturt prided himself on the fact that he treated the Aboriginal tribes he encountered on his expeditions impeccably, even when initially threatened with hostility.

Sturt's 1829 expedition along the Murrumbidgee utilised the services of two local male Aboriginals who were given the English



Portrait of Captain Charles Sturt, circa 1868. (Courtesy of Charles Sturt University)

names "Jemmy" and "Peter".

Sturt said they were of "infinite service" to the expedition, helping to kill kangaroos for food, guiding the party through the best routes avoiding steep hilly country, and importantly, introducing Sturt to other groups of local Aboriginals who could help the expedition as they moved down the Murrumbidgee.

Sturt also illustrated his fairness and character to those convicts who helped him.

He was adamant upon return from his expeditions that the convicts who accompanied him be entitled to all indulgences available to them from the colonial government. Sturt's representations later resulted in Governor Darling granting some remissions of sentence for several convicts.

Sturt was a deeply religious man who believed that "... something more powerful than human foresight or human prudence appeared to avert the calamities and dangers with which he and his companions were so frequently threatened. Sturt had a deep and abiding faith in the Providence of that good and all wise Being to whose care he committed himself."

After his failed expedition of 1844, Sturt continued his career as a public servant serving

as both colonial treasurer and colonial secretary. In 1847 he was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Geographical Society for his achievements in exploration. However, by 1851 Sturt retired on a pension due to failing eyesight.

In 1853 he left Australia for the last time returning to England where he resided at Cheltenham. He later applied unsuccessfully for the governorship of both Victoria in 1855 and Queensland in 1858.

Just prior to his death in 1869 and at the instigation of friends, Sturt had begun procedures to attain a knighthood, although he died before formalities were completed.

The high regard in which Charles Sturt was held is evidenced by the fact that the Queen later allowed his widow to use the title Lady Sturt.

References: HJ Gibbney, *Sturt, Charles (1795-1869)*, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 2, Melbourne University Press, 1967, pp. 495-498; Sherry Morris, *The Adventures of Charles Sturt*, *The Daily Advertiser*, October 18, 1997, p. 30; Keith Swan, *A History of Wagga Wagga*, pp. 2-6, 11-13; Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, Penguin Books, 1995, p. 60; Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga - A History*, 1999, pp. 15-16.