

# Southland of the Holy Spirit

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## Captain Charles Sturt

1795-1869

Captain Charles Sturt, Australia's most well-known inland explorer, was one of those who followed Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson. Sturt opened up most of southern Australia to free settlers. Born in Bengal, India, on 28 April 1795, Sturt was the son of Thomas Napier Lennox Sturt, an English judge with the East India Company. The young Sturt was sent to England at the age of four, and after attending a private preparatory school was admitted to Harrow, at the age of 15. In 1813 he joined the army and served in Spain, Canada, France and Ireland before his regiment was ordered to Sydney in 1826.[\[17\]](#)

Governor Ralph Darling had a high opinion of Sturt and appointed him his Military Secretary. Sturt became friendly with explorers John Oxley, Allan Cunningham and Hamilton Hume. In 1828, Governor Darling asked Sturt to lead an expedition into the interior to map the course of the Macquarie River and explore the country to the west. In carrying out his commission, Sturt discovered a large river which he called the Darling.

Sturt was a man of courage, faith and prayer. He kept a journal in which he wrote of his faith and of how he constantly took all his plans, difficulties and sorrows to the Lord in prayer. "Sturt, like most Australian explorers faced with a hostile environment, leaned hourly on God's mercy". At night he slept with a Bible that had belonged to his father-in-law under his pillow. When he had to throw away most of his possessions in the desert, he kept his Bible in preference to an oil lamp.[\[18\]](#) Through prayer and the reading of his Bible, Sturt found wisdom and strength to endure, and peace, even in times of danger.

On 10 November 1829, Sturt made a second expedition to find the mouths of the Darling and Murrumbidgee rivers. Humbly committing the safety of his party to the protection of Almighty God, Sturt noted in his journal:

Something more powerful than human foresight or human prudence, appeared to avert the calamities and dangers with which I and my companions were so frequently threatened; and had it not been for the guidance and protection we received from the Providence of that good and all-wise Being to whose care we committed ourselves, we should, ere this, have ceased to rank among the number of His earthly creatures.[\[19\]](#)

Sturt's party followed the Murrumbidgee until their way was blocked by a swamp. Leaving their horses and drays behind, they proceeded in a whaleboat until they came to "a broad and noble river",[\[20\]](#) which Sturt named the Murray.

They continued down the Murray River to the junction of the Murray and the Darling rivers, where their boat was shoaled on a sandbank. A group of 600 Aborigines, painted and armed, made menacing gestures accompanied by a war-song. Sturt made signs to the natives to desist their threats, but without success. As Sturt's party drew closer, the natives raised their spears, ready to hurl them. They were painted in various ways. Some, having painted their ribs, thighs and faces with a white paint, looked like skeletons. Others had painted themselves with red and yellow ochre and smeared themselves with grease, so that their bodies shone. In the background, the women, who carried supplies of darts, looked as if they had a bucket of whitewash thrown over them.

Seeing that it was going to be impossible to avoid an engagement, Sturt reluctantly picked up his double-barrelled shot gun, hoping that if he shot one of the natives, it would be sufficient to scare off the rest without further loss of life. At the very moment when he had his gun levelled at the closest native, with his hand on the trigger, he was checked by one of his men who drew Sturt's attention to a new party of natives that had arrived on the other bank. One of the Aborigines, whom Sturt recognised as being friendly from further up the river, leapt towards the native on

whom Sturt had his gun trained, and seizing him by the throat, pushed him backwards, along with the other natives who were threatening to attack the party. Sturt noted in his journal how their lives were saved because of the "miraculous intervention of Providence in our favour".<sup>[21]</sup>

They were able to resume their journey down the Murray and shortly afterwards discovered the junction of the Murray and Darling on 23 January. From then on the going got tougher as they passed through an "inhospitable country" and the men became weak from lack of food. On 9 February 1830, they arrived at a beautiful lake, which Sturt called Alexandrina Reservoir, where the Murray flowed into the sea. So the mystery of the rivers was solved.

Sturt's party, "very weak from poverty of diet and from great bodily fatigue", had the arduous task of rowing 900 miles upstream back to where they had left the horses and drays. The story of the party's return up the Murray is one of the most heroic episodes in Australian history. In order to make the rations last until they reached the depot, Sturt estimated that they would have to make the return trip--against a strong current--in the same time they took to row downstream. So they decided to row from dawn to 7:00 or 9:00 p.m. each day, stopping only for one hour's break at midday. That calculation was based on circumstances being favourable. No allowances were made for delays due to bad weather, illness or trouble from the Aborigines. To perform such a feat, it was unthinkable to reduce the men's rations to less than three quarters of a pound of flour per man per day.

The party left on 13 February. It took them only 23 days, rowing upstream (as compared to 26 days down) to reach the Murrumbidgee. Six days later, on 23 March, they reached the depot. It was an incredible feat. However, the depot was deserted, so the exhausted half-starved men had to row for another 19 days against the flooded Murrumbidgee. Sturt's men were uncomplaining, but some fell asleep at the oars. One became delirious and all suffered from malnutrition or scurvy and exhaustion.

In spite of the oppressive heat, threats from natives, and the low spirits of his men, Sturt remained calm and confident that God would bring them through. On reaching their camp opposite Hamilton's Plains, ninety miles from a depot at Pontebadgerly, Sturt decided to stop, since their supplies were almost exhausted. He sent two men ahead to the depot to get provisions. After waiting eight days for their return, they were just preparing to break camp, since they were down to their last ounce of flour, when the two men returned with supplies. They continued the homeward journey on foot, reaching Sydney on 25 May, six months from the time they had started out. Sturt fell on his knees, and with tears of joy thanked God for His help.<sup>[22]</sup>

Sturt's second journey was one of the most important explorations in Australian history because it explained the continent's river system and opened up much good pastoral land, thereby making way for the settlement of South Australia. However, the journey had taken a toll on Sturt's health; subsequently, he went almost totally blind, and never completely regained his vision. A few years later, in 1838, Sturt completed the charting of the Murray from the point where Hume and Hovell crossed it in 1824 to the Murrumbidgee junction, which Sturt himself had discovered in 1829.

In 1844-45 Sturt made a third exploratory journey. This was his famous Central Australian expedition, the most difficult and dangerous of them all. In 1842, Sturt commented: "Let any man lay the map of Australia before him, and regard the blank upon its surface, and then let him ask him if it would not be an honourable achievement to be the first to place a foot in its centre".<sup>[23]</sup> That was Charles Sturt's ambition. Now that the riddle of the rivers had been solved, Sturt set out again to solve the riddle of the inland. On 10 August 1844, Sturt's party left Adelaide with 15 men, 6 drays, a boat and 200 sheep. Before their departure that morning, Sturt spoke at a breakfast given in his honour:

Wherever I may go, to whatever part of the world my destinies may lead me, I shall yet hope one day to return to my adopted home, and make it my resting-place between this world and the next. When I went into the interior, I left the province with storm-clouds overhanging it, and sunk in adversity. When I returned, the sun of prosperity was shining on it, and every heart was glad. Providence had rewarded a people who had borne their reverses with singular firmness and magnanimity. Their harvest fields were bowed down by the weight of grain; their pastoral

pursuits were prosperous; the hills were yielding forth their mineral wealth, and peace and prosperity prevailed over the land. May the inhabitants of South Australia continue to deserve and to receive the protection of that Almighty power, on whose will the existence of nations as well as that of individuals depends![\[24\]](#)

Leaving Adelaide was difficult for Sturt because he was leaving behind his wife Charlotte with four children under nine years of age. His love for his wife and family were evident in the detailed letters he wrote to her while on the expedition.[\[25\]](#) On reaching Moorundie, Sturt regrouped and gave final instructions to his men. Lastly, he reminded them that:

Since they were about to commence a journey from which no one knew who would be permitted to return, I thought it was a duty they owed to themselves, to ask the guidance of that Power which could alone conduct them in safety through it, and having read to them a short prayer which I had prepared for the occasion to which I added the Lord's Prayer, I intimated to Mr. Poole that he was at liberty to proceed on his way.[\[26\]](#)

In order to avoid Eyre's "impenetrable Lake Torrens ", Sturt decided to skirt around it by following the Murray River to its junction with the Darling, then follow the Darling to its great bend at Menindee, and strike north-west from there. On 12 January 1845 the party arrived at Milparinka, where there appeared to be a permanent creek. Sturt decided it would be a good resting place before his next advance. In fact, it became their prison for the next six months. There was no water to the north and the drought had dried up all the pools to the south. The heat was unbearable, 132 degrees in the shade and 157 degrees in the sun! Robert Flood, the overseer of the stock, complained that the top of his head was burning, while the horses drooped theirs as if overcome with drowsiness; the ground was so hot that the horses pawed at it, trying to find a cool spot. At the end of February, Sturt noted:

Every article we have went to ruin before [the heat]; the teeth of our combs fell off, the handles of our razors split, every box warped, and every nail was loosened. Our tires fell off the wheels, and the drays rattled all over. The soles of the men's shoes were fairly burnt off.... The dogs would not stir from the water but remained on the bank, after having gone into it up to their necks, repeating their bathing as soon as they were dry.[\[27\]](#)

The men, including Sturt himself, also suffered from the effects of scurvy. Sturt's gums were swollen, his nose bled constantly, and he had violent headaches. As the disease progressed, Sturt's assistant, Poole, lost the use of his legs, the skin of his legs turned black, and large pieces of flesh hung down from the roof of his mouth.[\[28\]](#) The heat was intolerable and the drought continued without a single drop of rain.

Day after day and week after week the sun rose and set in [untiring] splendour, and every cloud that rose on the horizon was beat back by a moon as bright and I almost said as hot as the sun itself. [After six months] we had nothing new to engage the attention or to attract the eye. Nothing could exceed the desolation around us. Not a herb or flower was to be seen but the land was perfectly bare and scorched. The water we were drinking became putrid and diseased itself.[\[30\]](#)

Sturt wrote to his wife, Charlotte: "I trust ... God will yet permit my return, and that this severe trial will issue in our final good. Such at all events is my prayer, my daily prayer to the fountain of All Mercy".[\[31\]](#)

By May the waterhole had shrunk from nine to two feet in depth. On 12 July the drought broke. Sturt noted in his journal: "Had the drought continued for a month longer than it pleased the Almighty to terminate it",[\[32\]](#) they would not have survived. To conserve provisions, Sturt decided to send most of the party, under the charge of Poole, back to Adelaide. However Poole, still very ill, died on 16 July.

Sturt, with four men and provisions for 15 weeks, pushed north-west in the hope of finding a mountain range near the centre of the continent. He was determined "to trust to the goodness of Providence to release me to push on when He thought best".[\[33\]](#) He crossed Strzelecki Creek, Cooper Creek, the Diamantina River and Stony Desert (later to bear his name). On 8 September 1845, Sturt reached his farthest point (latitude 24 degrees 40 minutes S., longitude 138 degrees

E.) in what is now the Simpson Desert. He was 70 miles from the tropics, but was forced to retreat. Always sensitive to the needs of his men, Sturt had noticed that his partner Browne was "suffering very acutely". Sturt's journal later revealed his compassion: "A sudden thought struck me on which I determined immediately to act. I gave up the attempt to push on and told Mr. Browne that I had resolved on returning to the depot".<sup>[34]</sup> So they retraced their steps to Fort Grey, 443 miles away. Sturt described how he made that return trip in a letter to his wife, dated 21 September 1845:

I could not have hoped for water for 140 miles after leaving the creek and, believe me, it would have been a difficult job to have got our poor exhausted animals over such a distance without water, but I as I also told you, it pleased God, in this moment of our difficulty, to send rain that was sufficient for our relief and no more.<sup>[35]</sup>

Sturt's little party went from waterhole to waterhole, from puddle to puddle, arriving back at the depot on 2 October, but Sturt was off again a week later, leaving Browne in charge of the main party at the depot. When Sturt requested that Browne, the Medical Officer, remain behind, he told Sturt "he could not and would not desert [him] in such an infernal desert as this, that [Sturt] had always treated him like a brother and that he'd sooner die than return to Adelaide without [him]".<sup>[36]</sup> Sturt reluctantly parted with Browne and headed north to Cooper's Creek, which he explored eastwards for some distance, and once more he trudged through the Stony Desert. However, Sturt began to show the strain from the long sustained hardships--the shortage of water, fresh food, and the severity of the heat which was like a "fiery furnace". After his thermometer, graduated to 127 degrees Fahrenheit, burst, Sturt decided to return to the depot. Very disappointed, he wrote: "Providence had denied that success to me with which it had been pleased to crown my former efforts". He felt he was "a blighted and blasted man over whose head the darkest destiny had settled".<sup>[37]</sup>

The depot, however, was deserted. Buried in the sand, Sturt found a bottle containing a letter from Browne. Because of lack of water, the men had been forced to return to the old Rocky Glen Station, as no rain had fallen since July. When Sturt reached there on 17 November, he collapsed with scurvy. Sturt was carried on a dray another 270 miles to the Darling. They found sufficient water along the way to stay alive, and with the aid of some Aboriginal food, Sturt began to feel better by the time they arrived in Adelaide on 19 January 1846.

Sturt had travelled over 3000 miles into unknown territory. Although he was disappointed with the results, having found neither an inland sea nor a significant mountain range at the 28th parallel, the expedition had been a feat of great courage and endurance. In May 1846 Sturt received the gold medal of the Royal Geographical Society for his work.

However, the Central Australian expedition had seriously affected his health, especially his eyesight, so that he was not able to accept an appointment as Colonial Secretary. In 1853, Sturt left South Australia to return to England with his family for the sake of his children's education, and he spent his last years in Cheltenham, being widely respected and consulted on Australian affairs. Formalities were in progress for Sturt to receive a knighthood, when in June 1869 he died suddenly. However, the Queen permitted his wife to use the title "Lady Sturt".<sup>[38]</sup>

In his journals, Sturt has documented his great discoveries, as well as numerous scientific observations, and his Christian faith. He constantly recognised the Providential care<sup>[39]</sup> and intervention of God, and he was a model of Christian character. He was known for his ability to inspire and maintain the loyalty of his men (even under the most adverse conditions),<sup>[40]</sup> for his constant care for their welfare,<sup>[41]</sup> and for his conciliatory treatment of the natives.<sup>[42]</sup> Baron Van Mueller, writing in 1865, described him as "the greatest Australian explorer" and commented: "One of his qualifications was he was a gentleman, always kind and considerate of those working with him. He inspired others such as Leichhardt and Eyre by his great example".<sup>[43]</sup>