Robert O'Hara Burke Biography

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Contents

Robert O'Hara Burke Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Robert O'Hara Burke (1820-1861) was a British policeman and explorer who led the first expedition to cross the Australian continent.

Robert O'Hara Burke was born in County Galway, Ireland, the son of a British army officer. After attending Woolwich Military Academy, Burke served in an Austrian cavalry regiment until 1848, when he joined the mounted Irish constabulary. Migrating to Australia in 1853, he became a police inspector in the Victorian goldfields. After the outbreak of the Crimean War, he returned to Europe, hoping to distinguish himself as a soldier. Disappointed, he returned to Victoria in 1858 as superintendent of police at Castlemaine.

The South Australian government offered a prize in 1859 to the first explorer to cross the continent. John McDouall Stuart reached Mount Attack in 1860 before returning to Adelaide. Spurred by intercolonial rivalry, the rich colony of Victoria financed its own scientific expedition, and the flamboyant Burke, who wanted desperately to improve his fortunes, was chosen to lead it despite his inexperience.

Equipped with camels, horses, and supplies for 2 years, 15 men left Melbourne on Aug. 20, 1860. The party reached Menindee along the Darling River in October without mishap. Burke, with seven men, then pushed rapidly ahead to Cooper's Creek, 400 miles north. The remainder of the expedition, conveying heavy stores, made such slow progress that the impetuous Burke decided to make a dash for the coast with three companions. Because of exceptional rains they encountered no water shortage and in February 1861 sighted the Gulf of Carpentaria beyond impenetrable mangrove swamps. Marching 12 hours a day, the party covered the return journey of 1500 miles in 4 months. One man, Gray, died.

The rest regained Cooper's Creek April 21, 1861, only hours after the depot party had headed south. Instead of pursuing them, Burke mistakenly decided to head for a police station 150 miles away at Mount Hopeless. Exhausted, Burke and Wills died in Cooper's Creek. King, the only survivor, lived with aborigines until rescued in September.

This most costly expedition in Australian history accomplished little. Burke allowed no time for scientific work and kept no journal, but fortunately William John Wills kept a record. Four relief expeditions contributed considerably more knowledge about the north-central zone, particularly about its grazing potential, and in 1862 Stuart pioneered the principal all-weather route to the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless the tragedy of Burke and Wills became an Australian legend.