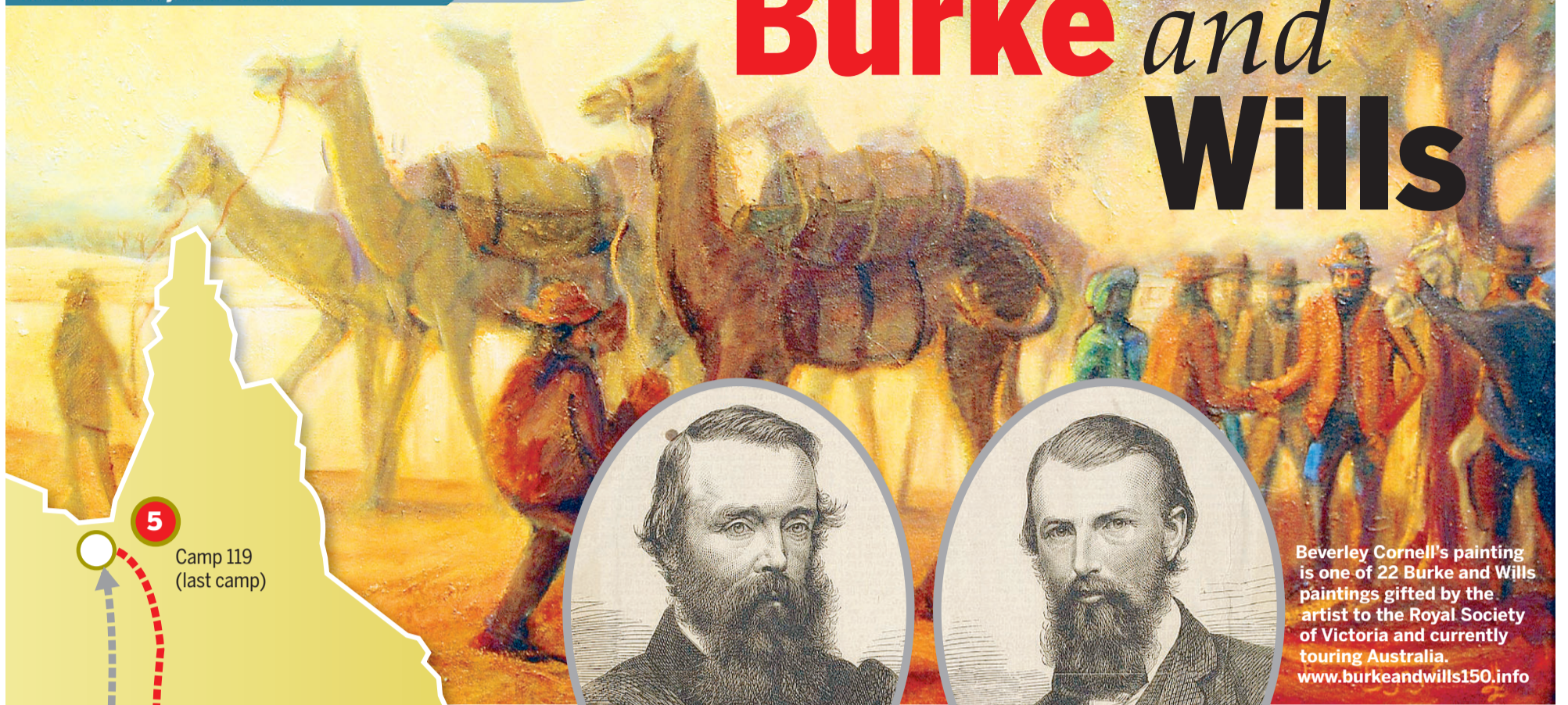


Burke and Wills



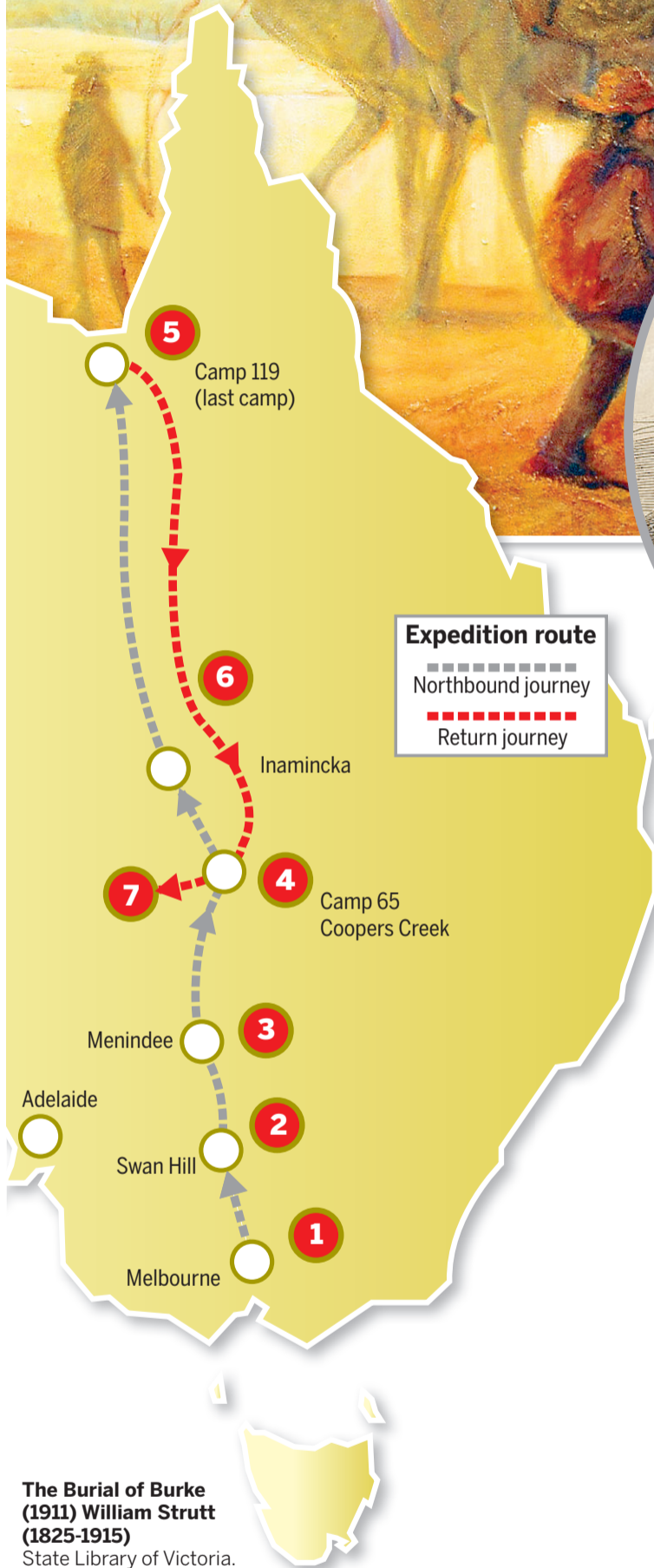
Beverley Cornell's painting is one of 22 Burke and Wills paintings gifted by the artist to the Royal Society of Victoria and currently touring Australia. www.burkeandwills150.info



Robert O'Hara Burke



William John Wills



Expedition route
 - - - - - Northbound journey
 - - - - - Return journey

IT is 150 years since Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills set out on their ill-fated scientific exploration of the Australian interior.

Exploration of the continent

European explorers in the 19th century saw mapping the Australian interior as a huge challenge.

Not only was the continent remote from Europe, but such issues as lack of water, huge distances, vast deserts, extreme weather conditions and, at times, hostile inhabitants meant exploration was difficult and dangerous work.

Until 1835 the only areas known to Europeans were the fringes of the southern coast and the land between Adelaide and Brisbane on the continent's eastern shore.

The expedition

On August 20, 1860, the Victorian Exploring Expedition, organised by the Royal Society of Victoria, left Royal Park in Melbourne, aiming to be the first team to cross the continent from south to north.

Robert O'Hara Burke, a Victorian policeman who had emigrated from Ireland, led the team of 19 men, 23 horses and 26 camels.

Second-in-command was camel and horse trader George Landells. William John Wills, a scientist originally from Devon in southern England, eventually became Burke's deputy after Landells' withdrawal from the expedition.

During the expedition many left the party and new members joined.

Indigenous Australia

Early European explorers used indigenous guides to assist in exploration of Australia. Burke and Wills had to hire different Aboriginal guides throughout the journey because they crossed mutually hostile clan territories.

Wildlife

Expedition member and renowned artist Ludwig Becker painted and sketched many fine examples of Australian wildlife and plants throughout the journey. He died on April 29, 1861.

Camel travel

The expedition's camels were from northern India and Afghanistan and skilled camel-handlers from India called sepoys were employed to manage the obstinate beasts.

Burke didn't realise that camel hooves are designed for sandy conditions, not wet or muddy areas. Several camels perished in boggy swamps and others were killed for food.



The "Dig Tree" at Cooper's Creek, where Burke and Wills found supplies to temporarily relieve their starvation.

RESOURCES

Lesson plans at the State Library of Victoria's Dig website:
www.burkeandwills.slv.vic.gov.au
www.burkeandwills.net.au

TIMELINE TO TRAGEDY

1. Melbourne August 20, 1860: At least 15,000 people see the Victorian Exploring Expedition leave Royal Park in Melbourne.

2. Swan Hill September 6, 1860: Almost the entire population of Swan Hill, about 300, welcomes the party.

3. Menindee October 12, 1860: The party arrives at Menindee. A four-man supply party remains behind, while the others continue towards Cooper's Creek, which is known as Cooper Creek today.

4. Camp 65 Cooper's Creek November 11, 1860: The advance party reaches Cooper's Creek. Burke, Wills, and general hands John King and Charlie Gray leave for the Gulf of Carpentaria taking enough provisions for three months.

5. Camp 119 (last camp) February 9, 1861: Burke, Wills, King and Gray arrive at Camp 119. Burke and Wills push northwards, leaving King and Gray at the camp, but they fail to reach the coast and turn for home.

6. April 21, 1861: Burke, Wills and King (Gray had died from an unknown cause) arrive to find that horse-handler William Brahe has abandoned the camp only hours before. Weak from exhaustion and starvation, they dig up supplies buried by Brahe.

7. June 27, 1861: Wills dies (cause unknown), while travelling west along Cooper's Creek, trying to reach a cattle station. On June 29, King departs in search of help but soon after Burke also dies. The exact date and cause of his death is not known. In all, seven died during the expedition.

The Burial of Burke (1911) William Strutt (1825-1915)
 State Library of Victoria.

