

Australian Heroes of Discovery

Australia is an ancient land but a young country. Although its indigenous population have been here for many thousands of years, Australia did not properly present itself for discovery until after 1788 when the First Fleet from England arrived in Sydney Harbour. Between 1788 and 1813 the new settlement called Sydney was restricted to the coastal plains. Although many attempts had been made during this time to move westward, the large range of mountains, now called the Blue Mountains, proved a difficult and formidable barrier to the plains beyond.

What must it have been like to be perched on the edge of a new land without knowing anything about where they were and a world away from their loved ones and friends? They had no idea how large the land was and what lay beyond the seemingly impenetrable mountains they could see rising high to the west. There was, however, an insatiable desire to find the answers to all their questions and to take hold of this newly discovered land and make it their own.

Captain James Cook, of course, must be the first explorer to be mentioned as it is he and his crew on the bark Endeavour who first sailed along and investigated the east coast of Australia in 1770 and made their discoveries known in England. Based on his reports of 'fine harbours for settlement' England decided to ease their overflowing prisons by setting up a penal colony in the new land and this was first achieved at Botany Bay in 1788.

Matthew Flinders was another great navigator who is best known for making the first complete circumnavigation of Australia and mapping 'the last unknown', the south coast of Terra Australis in 1802-1803. Prior to that voyage he, with his friend and doctor, George Bass, in 1798 proved that Tasmania was an island by sailing around it and charting it and discovering a strait which they called Bass Strait.

On land, after many failed attempts, the Blue Mountains were finally crossed in 1813 by **Gregory Blaxland, William Lawson and William Charles Wentworth**. The rugged mountains had at last yielded their secrets and a suitable route was opened to allow farming and grazing to the west.

There were many great explorers who did their part to open up large tracts of land and find rivers and lakes. Many gave their lives when they tried to open up central Australia, believing that it held a great inland sea. **John Forrest** opened up parts of Western Australia and later became premier. **Ludwig Leichhardt, Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills and Edward John Eyre** all did their part to open up south and central Australia and as far north as the Gulf of Carpentaria.

They all put their own lives on the line and the lives of those who accompanied them. Often they made rash decisions and travelled into deserts in the heat of summer. Some,

like Ludwig Leichhardt, disappeared and died in unknown circumstances. They all, however, settled myths and taught us about this wonderful land that is Australia.

CAPTAIN CHARLES STURT (1795-1869)

He is one of our greatest explorers and is known for carrying out one of the most heroic journeys of discovery in Australian exploration history. He was born in India about the time that Flinders and Bass were exploring Australia's coastline. After spending time in the British Army Sturt sailed for Australia in 1827 and began showing a keen interest in the exploration of the largely unmapped and untapped country. Many people of the day, including Sturt, believed that the rivers which flowed west ended in an inland sea and there had been many expeditions to try and prove that the sea existed.

Sturt led three expeditions and made important discoveries about our river systems. On his first expedition in 1828, he was sent out by Governor Darling to map the Macquarie River with another explorer, **Hamilton Hume**. Due to a terrible drought they couldn't reach the Macquarie but discovered a river which Sturt named the Darling. They hadn't mapped the Macquarie River but they did prove that there was no inland sea in northern New South Wales.

His second expedition was carried out in 1829 to find out where the Murrumbidgee River, which had been discovered by **Hume and Hovell**, ended. They took a whaleboat on a horse-drawn dray over hills and put it together for the expedition down the river. It was a dangerous journey but they finally came upon a large expanse of water which Sturt named the Murray River. The party followed it through to where it flowed into a lake, which he called Lake Alexandrina, and from there, through a narrow sandbar, to the sea. Unfortunately they were unable to get their boat through the sand bar and had to make a 47 day epic journey of endurance, rowing 12 hours a day against flooding tides, back to the Murrumbidgee where they had started. Some men died from the experience and Sturt became temporarily blind.

His third expedition, 14 years later, was to put to rest the many stories about the purported inland sea which he no longer believed existed. He had already proven that the west flowing rivers to the east did not flow into an inland sea, but turned south to the ocean. This expedition was to reach the exact centre of Australia where he hoped there may be one or more big lakes because he had noticed birds heading north every autumn and returning in spring. With **John McDouall Stuart**, another intrepid explorer, he and his party left Adelaide in 1844. They followed the Murray and then the Darling north to the Barrier Ranges (near present day Broken Hill). After some time in that place with little water they finally set off for the centre. Here they suffered dreadful hardship when they reached a stony desert which is now called Sturt's Stony Desert. Further on they came to the Simpson Desert. It was so hot their thermometers broke. They had travelled 1500km and everyone was exhausted. Sturt became ill and they had to turn back. By the time they returned to Adelaide they had been away 17 months and Sturt was treated as a hero. He had found rivers and explored Australia's centre, adding a great deal to the knowledge of Australia's interior. Sturt's Desert Pea was named after him.

He was at different times South Australian Surveyor General, Registrar General then Colonial Treasurer and later Colonial Secretary. He died in England in 1869.

SIR DOUGLAS MAWSON (1882-1958)

Although he was born in England, Douglas Mawson moved with his family to Sydney, Australia, when he was only two years old. He studied engineering and science at university where he found a real interest in geology. Later Douglas lectured at Adelaide University on the origin and structure of rocks. The time he spent in the Flinders Ranges on field trips taught him about glacial rocks and built up within him an interest in the Antarctic region.

When aged 26 Douglas Mawson was given his first chance to visit Antarctica when he joined an expedition led by Sir Ernest Shackleton, a famous British explorer. While there he joined in undertaking studies to locate and trek to the magnetic South Pole and climbed the active volcano, Mt. Erebus.

In 1911 Mawson decided to lead his own expedition to Antarctica to explore this still mainly unknown and unclaimed part of the earth. He raised money, recruited a team of young men and sailed from Hobart to explore and map the northern most coastal area of the Antarctic continent. After winter, Mawson took two of his men, Mertz and Ninnis, to explore another area. After two of them passed safely over an ice bridge, the third man, Ninnis, fell into the crevasse with a dog sled full of supplies. The loss of Ninnis, as well as the dogs and supplies, was devastating. Mawson and Mertz had to try to get back to camp, 500km away, and gradually killed and ate the remaining dogs to survive. Mertz died on the way back, probably poisoned by the dog meat and Mawson, himself close to death, had to travel the last 160km on his own. He found the supplies left by a search team and eventually met up with the searchers themselves.

On his return home Mawson was hailed a hero and his explorations led to Australia claiming over 6 million square kilometres of the Antarctic continent as Australian Territory.

Between 1929 and 1931 Douglas Mawson headed two more trips to Antarctica and maintained an interest in that continent for the rest of his life. He passed away at the age of 76 in 1958.

Sir Douglas Mawson became South Australia's most famous explorer and an Australian hero. He was a man of vision and determination and demonstrated remarkable persistence and courage to survive all his exploration expeditions. He inspired a generation of people and left a wonderful legacy of scientific knowledge about the last great continent to be explored.