

Cover Essay

A Last Waltz for Burke, Wills, and King

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This issue's cover art is John Longstaff's "Arrival of Burke, Wills and King at the deserted camp at Cooper's Creek, Sunday evening, 21st April 1861," which we have chosen to reflect our recent 6th Biennial meeting in Melbourne, joint with the 4th International One Health Congress, and to mark a special focus issue on Oceania. This is a colonial-era painting—Longstaff was born in 1861 and died in 1946—painted in the European style, by a true colonial, Sir John Campbell Longstaff. Longstaff's biography is typical of many 19th Century Australians—he was born in Victoria, Australia, the son of an English storekeeper. He was educated at a country boarding school, and despite his father's disapproval, decided on a career as a portrait artist. He won the first ever National Gallery of Victoria scholarship to travel through Europe, where he honed his skills and became a successful portrait and landscape painter. He was then appointed an official war artist with the Australian Infantry Force in the First World War. His portraits were groundbreaking—he painted the first national portrait of an Australian woman, Ellis Rowan, and he won an Archibald prize (one of 5) for his portrait of the famous bush poet A.B. (Banjo) Paterson, who coined the lyrics for the unofficial Australian National Anthem "Waltzing Matilda."

Longstaff's story and this painting represent the European/Western/Northern narrative of Australia—the romantic ideal of European expansion into the outback, of rolling grassland dominating a harsh semi-desert landscape, of colonial grit over hardship. But why did we choose a

colonial artist to represent Australia and Oceania? We could have pictured a traditional aboriginal painting, or one of the famous contemporary aboriginal artists: the watercolor painter Albert Namatjira, who was the first native person to be granted Australian citizenship; Gloria Petyarre, whose *Bush Medicine* series revolutionized Australian Aboriginal modern art; or the East Kimberly abstract painter Rover Thomas, who when introduced to a Mark Rothko painting, famously remarked, "That bugger paints like me!."

It's the back-story to "Arrival of Burke, Wills and King" that made us choose this piece. John Longstaff painted the picture in 1907 to celebrate the heroism of European dominance of the continent. The subject is the ill-fated expedition of Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills in 1860. They set out, like dozens of earlier expeditions, with the noble colonial goal of traversing the continent, identifying land to farm, and finally proving (or not) the long-hypothesized presence of an inland sea in the heart of the continent. The Expedition's leader, Robert O'Hara Burke, was an Irish-Australian policeman with no actual experience of the outback. The surveyor, William Wills, was third-in-command, but again had little experience of outback hardship. At the time of the expedition, aboriginal people were considered simply a threat, and Burke ordered a hundredweight of powder, and 500 pounds of balls and bullets to defend the party. As this expedition traipsed across the outback, it fell rapidly into disarray, with disputes among the staff, lack of experience in the leadership, and poor decisions on stocking food and provisions. When the expedition first reached Cooper's

creek on November 11th, it had diminished from 19 men, 18 camels, a couple of dozen horses, covered wagons, and even a large oak desk and stools, to just 6 people, 15 camels, and 19 horses. Burke's goal was now to make for the Gulf of Carpentaria, taking Wills, Charles Gray and John King, and leaving the others at Cooper's Creek. The latter were ordered to stay for around three months, or until their supplies dwindled, and if the others had failed to return by then, assume the worst and leave for home. Burke's team crossed the Stony Desert and marched for 6 weeks, eventually reaching the coast, exhausted and emaciated, to become the first expedition to successfully reach the Gulf of Carpentaria. They came across aboriginal people, but either fired shots at them to keep them at bay, or briefly met with them, accepting gifts of food, and in at least one case, advice on specific 'bush tucker.'

Burke's team now had to make the onerous journey back to Cooper's creek in time for their rendezvous, having already taken 2 weeks longer than expected and used up more than 3/4 of their food supply. With atrocious weather conditions, they slowed down and starved, shooting most of their animals for food, and carting their supplies on their own backs. Gray died four days before they reached Cooper's Creek ten-and-a-half weeks after leaving, and just nine hours after the rest of their team (and their supplies) had decided to return home. They arrived at the famous "Dig tree" painted by Longstaff, where their colleagues had carved the words "DIG 3FT NW APR 21 1861." They realized their friends had left that very day, but were too exhausted to catch up with them. They dug up a small load of supplies and after 2 days decided to slowly follow the creek on foot via Mount Hopeless to what Burke thought was the location of a sheep station. They met aboriginal people on the way who gave them food and water. But Burke, Wills, and King were singularly unable to survive in the bush alone and returned to Cooper's Creek. Support from a local Aboriginal family dwindled after King fired on them for 'being too friendly.' This ignorance and outright racism was their downfall. Wills stayed in camp, while Burke and King attempted to locate the family again. Burke died a couple of days later of starvation, King returning to the camp to find Wills dead. Ironically, King found the family by following their tracks and they fed him enough to keep him alive for a few weeks. A rescue expedition eventually found King, in tattered rags, limping along behind this family. King and the remaining expedition members were received as heroes by the people of Melbourne on their return home.

Longstaff's painting departs from the European traditional landscape in its almost overbearing earthen shades. The scene is a true representation of the dry creekbed ecosystem of Cooper's Creek. It is also a perfect metaphor for the despair that can be seen in Burke's eyes as he stares beyond the viewer, utterly defeated by nature. This dramatic image of three Australian colonials reaches deep across Australian history and points out the irony in what was intended as an heroic tribute. Longstaff viewed the death of these men as noble and heroic. Perhaps. Was it a foolish death? Maybe. But what is certain is that it could have been avoided if the colonial mindset had appreciated indigenous knowledge. With these thoughts, we pay homage to all of the cultures of Oceania, and look forward to celebrating again at the next biennial meeting in Colombia, 2018.

ABOUT THE DIG TREE

The Burke and Wills Dig Tree is one of Australia's national treasures and an everlasting reminder of the country's ambitious spirit. Estimated to be between 200–250 years old, this beautiful Coolibah tree (*Eucalyptus microtha*) is located on the Northern bank of Cooper.

Before the base camp party deserted Depot Camp 65, they buried provisions and supplies in the remote chance that Burke and Wills would return. Instructions to find these provisions were carved into the trunk of the tree. The three blazes carved onto the tree trunk were:

B LXV

Dig 3FT NW

Dec 6 60 April 21 61

In 1898, John Dick carved a portrait of Burke's face into another tree, appropriately nicknamed, the "Face Tree", downstream from the Dig Tree. The three dig blazes have now been covered to help preserve the tree, although the Face Tree blaze is still very visible today.

ABOUT THE ART AND ARTIST

Sir John Campbell Longstaff was born in Clunes, Victoria, in March of 1861, and educated at a boarding school in Miners Rest, Clunes State School, and the Melbourne National Gallery School. Longstaff displayed an aptitude for the arts at a young age, winning awards while in grade

school. Longstaff was known for his exquisite portraiture, winning the Archibald Prize five times in his lifetime. Longstaff was appointed several prestigious positions including President of the Victorian Artists Society in 1924, and Trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria in 1927, and was knighted in 1928, making him the first Australian artist to receive this honor.

ON THE COVER

John Longstaff, *Arrival of Burke, Wills and King at the deserted camp at Cooper's Creek, Sunday evening, 21st April 1861* 1907. Oil on canvas, 285.7 × 433.0 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Gilbee Bequest, 1907 (343-2).