

Dig 3ft NW

Sarah Murgatroyd

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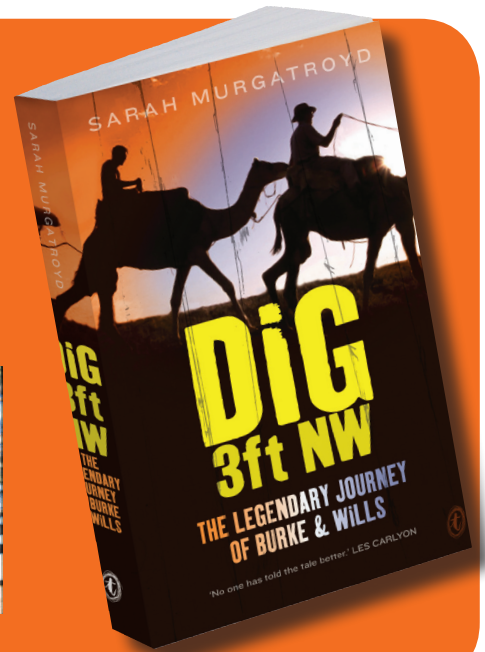
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Recommended for Upper Primary/Secondary

Resource Kit Contains

- Praise
- Synopsis
- Author information
- Themes
- Preliminary activity
- Close study of the text
- Essay questions



Praise

'Sarah Murgatroyd deftly captures the foolishness, suffering and hapless heroism of one of the 19th-century's least-known, but most epic, undertakings...you will be biting your nails.' Bill Bryson

Introduction to the text

If you have ever flown across Australia during the daytime you will have been amazed by the never-ending red earth that undulates below. For hours the landscape flows on, broken by inhospitable rocky outcrops or mountains of stone. It takes several days to travel by rail through wild and lonely landscape from Adelaide to Darwin. And this is the twentieth century. Can you imagine setting out to explore the unknown and seemingly unfriendly inland of Australia with only camels and horses, with one surveyor and a leader who was notorious for getting lost on his way home from the pub?

This is the story of probably the most famous of these explorations—the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition, which began in 1860. It is a story of great bravery, but also of great foolhardiness, of politics and rivalry between states, of ego-driven men, of at times incredible incompetence and unwise decisions which sometimes drive the reader, safe in his or her armchair, to absolute despair at the wanton waste of it all. This was a waste, not only of money, but also of lives.

Australia was known as 'terra nullius', a land empty of people and civilisation. But it was a country which had been inhabited for maybe fifty thousand years by a resourceful indigenous population who knew very well how to survive and live happily. They knew how to find water and food and how bush food must be prepared. They had a healthy and nutritious diet. Over and over again, the explorers were greeted in friendly fashion by the aborigines—shown water and given fish and nardoo.

But over and over again the explorers were too arrogant to follow their advice, refusing to believe that these 'savages' might know more than they did.

About the Author

Sarah Murgatroyd was born in England in 1967 and grew up on a farm in Sussex. After a year in China, India and the Himalayas, she gained an honours degree in Philosophy and Literature at Warwick University, and then studied broadcast journalism at Cardiff University. In 1993 she came to Australia where she travelled extensively, providing news and current affairs coverage for the BBC. To research *The Dig Tree* she retraced the footsteps of Burke and Wills across Australia. Sarah died of cancer in march 2002, a few weeks after *The Dig Tree* was first published. *Dig 3ft NW* is the YA adaptation.

Themes

- Explorers
- Survival
- History
- Trust

Preliminary activity

Imagine it is your job to choose a leader for an expedition such as this one.

- What skills and experience would you look for in a leader?
- What personal qualities would you expect to find in a successful candidate?
- How would you choose a deputy leader?

- What attributes and talents would you look for in the other members of the team?

Close study of the text

Chapter One

The Dead Heart

1. Why was inland Australia called the dead heart?
2. How is a sense of chaos and mayhem created in this first chapter? Is it what you would expect as an expedition sets off?
3. Why did so many people turn up to see them off?
4. What rather ominous signs appeared before they even left Royal Park?
5. Why were the settlers reluctant to leave the coast?
6. What did most people feel about the bush?
7. So why did the explorations begin to become popular?
8. Describe in your own words Sturt's venture into the inland.
9. Why was it believed there was an inland sea?
10. When Gregory went to try to find the lost Leichardt, what was his theory about the inland? Is his idea still most people's view of central Australia? How has modern technology changed people's perceptions. Would you like to live there?
11. Why were the naval expeditions to the north unable to penetrate the interior?

Chapter Two

Lifting the veil

1. What was the Melbourne Philosophical Institute? What did they argue about?
2. How did the discovery of gold in Victoria affect the attitude towards exploration?
3. What is meant by saying that the centre of Australia insulted the colonial mind?
4. Why did Victoria think it was best suited to make an expedition?
5. How did the construction of the overland telegraph influence the Melbourne Philosophical Institute?
6. What issues split the Melbourne Philosophical Institute?
7. Why did the states refuse to make a combined effort to explore the interior?
8. What were the special personal qualities of John McDouall Stuart?
9. What was his vision of the inland? If you have been to Central Australia would you agree with him?

10. Describe his journey through the Flinders Ranges to Coober Pedy. How had he come to terms with the capriciousness of the Australian desert?

Chapter Three

Meeting Burke

1. What was the effect of South Australia's £2000 prize on Victoria's reluctance to mount an expedition? Why did South Australia offer this prize?
2. Why was the situation of choosing a leader for the expedition described as desperate?
3. Why was Burke chosen as the leader? On the evidence given so far, do you think it was a good choice? Give your reasons.
4. What do we learn about Burke as a man in this chapter?
5. What were the reasons behind Burke's choice of explorers?
6. Do you believe that there is any evidence in this chapter that the Exploration Committee was not capable of organising a Sunday Picnic?

Chapter Four

Day one

1. The exploration only got as far as Essendon by the end of the first day. What are some of the words used in the first paragraph to suggest that the exploration was once again in a state of chaos?
2. Why was William Wills so important to the success of the expedition? What sort of man was he?
3. Who was Landells and what was to be his role?
4. What was the significance of the Exploration Committee telling Burke he must follow Landell's instructions with regard to the camels?
5. Why, against all common-sense, did they leave at the height of summer?
6. What sort of person was Landells? Why was he likely to clash with the scientists, Becker and Beckler?
7. What evidence do we find on the very first night that Burke was not fully committed to the exploration?

Chapter Five

No tea, no fire

As they travelled through the north of Melbourne they were plagued by heavy rain. They were wet through and some of the camels became bogged.

1. Why was it soon realised that Burke's appointment as leader destroyed any veneer of scientific credibility?

2. Why was Burke so unimpressed with Beckler? What does this show of Burke's ego?
3. Why did Wills bear the heaviest burden?
4. What were the problems caused by the very heavy load they carried?
5. What was in the extra 12 tonnes? What is your opinion of their importance?
6. Describe the first few hours of each day. What effects might this have on the morale of the men?
7. As they proceeded across the plains, what other tensions were becoming evident?
8. The problem was that Burke had so much to prove. What do you think Burke had to prove?
9. What shock awaited Burke at Swan Hill?
5. How did Wright come to join the party?
6. What do you think were Burke's intentions in splitting the party? Do you think he had a genuine desire to explore or was it simply a need for self-glorification?
7. What are the three pieces of evidence that there had always been a secret plot to split the exploration?
8. Which of the three Melbourne papers do you agree with?
9. Mutawintji is described as a haunting spiritual world, an emergency larder and a place of refuge. The explorers described it as dark and gloomy. Do you think Burke had any real feeling for the land? Was he a real explorer? Did he have the temperament for a leader?
10. What was wrong with Burke's communication skills?

Chapter Six

Fifty-six days

1. How did Burke react to the unexpected?
2. Why did Burke suddenly decide to form a depot on the Darling River?
3. Why was it becoming impossible to create a sense of unity among the explorers?
4. What four things happened at Balranald to create a heightened sense of Burke's inexperience and incompetence?
5. From the evidence on p68 and the way Becker was made to suffer, do you feel this was a deliberate ploy on Burke's part to try to break Becker's spirit?
6. Describe in your own words the quarrel between Landells and Burke. Was Landells exaggerating when he said Burke was a madman who would get them all killed?
7. How was Wills becoming more influential over the exploration?
8. What other evidence is there of Burke's inability to successfully lead the expedition?
9. Do you believe at this point that Burke had any chance of reaching the interior? Give your reasons.

Chapter Seven

Splitting the party

1. Write your description of what you imagine life was like in Menindee?
2. Although it was reaching high summer with withering waterholes, why do you think Burke wanted to keep going?
3. What evidence is there of Burke's lack of ethics?
4. Why was his gesture towards Becker described as hollow?

Chapter Eight

Cooper's Creek

1. Describe Cooper's Creek as the explorers found it. Did they appreciate it?
2. Read again the descriptions of the indigenous people on pp88-89. Did Burke and his party see any relevance to themselves in this timeless way of life? Did they try to learn from them at all?
3. What does the writer mean when she says Burke came to conquer, not to learn. What evidence is there in this chapter to support this? Can Burke and Wills' attitude towards the Aboriginal people be explained or excused?
4. Why did Wright fail? Why was his position untenable?
5. Much of this chapter is a catalogue of the woes that beset the party. Make a list of these disasters.
6. Burke decided to leave the Cooper with only Wills, King and Gray. What evidence is there that Burke had not thought through his plans and did not have a contingency plan? Is this Burke's basic flaw?
7. If you were a member of the party would you rather have Burke or Wills as your leader? Why?
8. Compare the way this small group started out on 15 December with the way the expedition started out from Royal Park.

Chapter Nine

Shooting the sun

1. Why was it hard for Wills to set his course?
2. What was the difference between the logs made by Burke and Wills? How much does the Lyons mix-up prove that ego can lead to foolish decisions?

- Describe the dynamics of this little group. How were the three men different?
- What was wrong with the way they tried to beat dehydration?

Chapter Ten

Beneath the veil

If you have trudged through sand hills at the beach you can imagine the exhaustion created by doing it without respite. Added to this trial was the spinifex which cut their legs and tore their clothes. Moreover the camels were exhausted too. As they followed a large creek the vegetation changed.

- In the meantime why was Wright afraid for his party?
- How did Stuart's style of expedition differ from that of Burke's? (Give three examples.)
- Burke could have turned back without incurring any criticism when he reached Drop Dead Day. Why didn't he turn south?
- When did the expedition turn into a fight for survival?
- Why did it take so long for Wright to leave with his back-up party?
- How was Brahe's party affected by the long wait? What is meant by saying each day was a dislocation from reality?
- How difficult would you find this endless waiting?
- How far was Burke's party from the sea?

Chapter Eleven

Turning south

- What would you have done if faced with Burke's party's shortage of food?
- What physical symptoms were the men showing?
- Gray stole some flour to survive. What was the effect of this on the morale of the men? Did he deserve his thrashing?
- It was Burke who compassionately decided that Gray should have a decent burial. It took a whole day. What is the terrible irony in Burke's act of goodwill?

Chapter Twelve

Dig

- Why did Brahe decide to leave Depot Camp?
- Meanwhile how was Wright's group faring?
- What was Wright's fatal mistake when it came to looking for water?

- Why didn't Wright's party stand a chance of reaching the Cooper?
- What further disasters befell Burke's party?
- Brahe and Wright met up and decided to ride back to the Dig tree in a final attempt to find Burke and Wills. Why did they stay there for such a short time?

Chapter Thirteen

This extraordinary continent

- Explain why Burke and Wills found it so hard to live off the land.
- How did Burke's hostility towards the aborigines cause enormous catastrophe?
- Was Wills correct in saying that our deaths will rather be the result of the mismanagement of others than any rash acts of our own? Make a class list of the mistakes made by Burke and Wills and another list of the mistakes made by others, including the Exploration Committee.
- Was Burke justified in saying they had been abandoned?
- Why does the author say that Robert O'Hara Burke had died an honourable death?

Chapter Fourteen

The scarecrow

- Again we see how state rivalries dominated any action. How did the Royal Society waste time in mounting a rescue?
- What was the result of the Exploration Committee handing complete control of Walker's expedition to Queensland?
- Was King in fact all alone? Who cared for him?
- Who was the scarecrow?
- Howitt's rescue party is described as a model of efficiency. How do we know this?

Chapter Fifteen

Aftermath

- Why did the Melbourne newspapers and citizens celebrate Burke as a hero?
- Why did the plan to praise Burke backfire on the Royal Society.
- Somebody had to be blamed, so a Royal Commission was set up. Why was the Royal Commission a fiasco?
- Why did Brahe and Wright bear most of the blame? Where do you think most of the blame should lie?

Chapter Sixteen

Bones

1. What was the mystery surrounding the discovery of Gray's bones? Why will we never know more about Gray's death?
2. Howitt's search for the missing bodies was achieved easily. Can you account for this? What is it about this anomaly which makes the tragedy of Burke and Wills' expedition more ironic?
3. Of the four rescue expeditions, none lost a man. In the light of this, would you agree with Neumayer that Burke and Wills' expedition was the most brilliant achievement yet on record in the annals of Australian exploration?
4. Why is it said that the failure of Burke's expedition led to far greater discoveries than its success would have ever done?
5. Burke's inexperience was worsened by other personality traits. Name five of these quirks of personality.
6. Why were Burke and Wills the victims of too much water rather than the victims of an arid desert?
7. What are the qualities of Burke that you find most likeable and which endeared him to many of his fans in Melbourne?
8. Murgatroyd says that Burke's fatal flaw was mistiming events and that complacency was the final mistake. What examples have you found in the book of his mistiming and complacency?
9. What other faults do you consider to be a vital contribution to the downfall of the exploration?
10. As Burke and Wills were being buried in Melbourne, what celebration was taking place in Adelaide?

Epilogue

1. What did Victoria gain from the expedition? What had it hoped for?
2. Do you think the aboriginal communities were adequately compensated for their assistance?

Essay questions

1. Discuss whether or not Burke became a victim of his own excess of bravery?
2. Given the circumstances surrounding the expedition, and the different personalities involved, discuss whether the most striking aspect of the Burke and Wills expedition is not that it failed but that it so nearly succeeded?
3. Too much ego can override an ability to listen to other people and to take advice. What is the effect of a sense of superiority and a desire to win at any price as they are seen in this expedition?