



## The Northern Territory of Australia

# John McDouall Stuart: Explorer

by Robyn Smith\*

John McDouall Stuart was one of Australia's greatest and most successful explorers. His career includes the distinction that throughout the five expeditions he led, he did not lose one human life. Stuart was born on 7 September 1815 at Dysart in Fifeshire, Scotland.

He never married, but was apparently once engaged to an unnamed cousin of his friend, William Russell, in Scotland. He was a small man, standing 5'6" and weighing less than nine stone. He was schooled privately and at military academies in Scotland. He briefly worked as a clerk in a shipping office, but loathed paperwork and being indoors. He sailed from Dundee to Australia on the barque *Indus* in September 1838, aged 23 years, and arrived in South Australia on 17 January 1839.

Stuart was never a particularly healthy man and may have had tuberculosis when he sailed from Scotland to Australia. A passenger on the *Indus* recorded in his diary:

*On the voyage out Mr Stuart was somewhat delicate, having two rather severe attacks of vomiting blood. He was a great reader, comparatively silent, very stubborn, yet withal an agreeable companion, and was rather a favourite amongst his fellow passengers (Mudie, 1958; 4).*

During the 1830s, the explorer Eyre had made forays into the South Australian outback and reported both the Flinders and Gawler Ranges barren, hence names such as Despair, Deception and Hopeless on Eyre's maps. Good rain, however, proved them both to be excellent areas for sheep and cattle. Stuart was to play a crucial role in surveying the areas for various clients who later established "runs" or stations.

### Stuart's Career in Australia

After arriving in Australia, Stuart began work as a private surveyor in the undiscovered lands of South Australia emanating from Adelaide. His best friend was William Finke, after whom the Finke River is

named. Finke made his money buying and selling land, and later joined James Chambers, Stuart's best customer who was to become a close friend, in pastoral pursuits. Both were to become financiers of Stuart's expeditions. Many Northern Territory landmarks are named after Chambers, who accumulated his wealth by horse trading and contract mail deliveries, or his daughters. Chambers bought large tracts of land, surveyed by Stuart, and ran cattle on them. He also bought a mine with Finke after Stuart had discovered copper at Oratunga in 1854. They invited Stuart to join them:

*...but he was too restless to settle down. He hated sleeping indoors, and did not even like to camp in the same place for two nights. New country had become his great passion, as well as his business (Pike; 9).*

In 1843 survey work was scarce and Stuart became a farmer, although wheat prices were low and profits minimal. After 12 months of farming, Charles Sturt provided the opportunity which would result in Stuart's extraordinary success.



### Expedition 1: 1844 - 18 months

Stuart was invited by Charles Sturt to join his party in the search for the great inland sea and became Sturt's second-in-charge following the death of James Poole at Depot Glen, 300 miles north of the Murray-Darling river junction, where they were locked in because of drought and lack of water. Sturt was nearly blind, and Stuart had to draw the maps of the expedition. The party discovered Eyre's Creek and beyond that, only stony desert. Sturt made more attempts to get to the centre of Australia but was forced back 250 miles from his goal. The party raced against the oncoming summer to get back to the Darling River. The boat Sturt had intended to float on the great inland sea was left to rot at Depot Glen.

Stuart returned to the city for a time, then went out to the country areas as a private surveyor where his

skills were in great demand. He surveyed the country for minerals and to see where there was appropriate land for sheep and cattle. He spent from 1846-58 undertaking surveys for numerous clients. He did not place great importance on money. He would earn it in the bush, spend it in the city, then return to the bush to work.

*Sometimes he went to Adelaide and gave gay parties for the country families who had entertained him. He never cared how quickly his money was spent. When it was gone, he went back to his surveys. (Pike, 1958; 9).*

### **Expedition 2: May 1858 - 4 months**

Funded by William Finke alone, Stuart, now 42 years old, set off with one assistant, Forster, and an Aboriginal youth who later "deserted" the white men (but returned to Mount Eyre and informed whites that when he had left, the two men were starving). They took six horses and enough flour, meat and tea for six weeks.

Forging north, they discovered permanent fresh water in a creek which they named after Chambers. Stuart then turned southwest and finished up at Streaky Bay in South Australia. Rations intended for six weeks had lasted them four months.

Stuart had discovered 40,000 square miles of possible sheep country. His expedition cost £10 for food and £28 for his assistant's wages. A large, government-funded expedition headed by Herschel Babbage covered only 40 miles. Stuart handed his diary and maps over to the government and in return was promised 1,000 square miles of the new country he had mapped. He never received the land promised by the government because of political wrangling involving adversaries of Chambers and Finke.

*As it turned out, however, his only reward for this journey was a gold watch from the Royal Geographical Society in London. (Pike; 12)*

When Stuart and his assistant returned from that expedition, they were sick and starving. Stuart told Robert Bruce, Overseer at Arkaba Station, "I've had a terrible rough trip." (Mudie; 41). Bruce recalled Stuart's return in 1858 and explained why he failed to recognise him:

*I had seen the plucky little man on several occasions previously when he followed his profession as a land surveyor, and wore a full dark beard and rather long-tailed blue coat with brass buttons, a garment even then going muchly out of fashion. Stuart of course considered the long-tailed blue became him, or he would not have*

*worn it, and I must say it was very appropriate. I should not have mentioned the coat in question had not the discarding of it and the assumption of dirty moleskin pants and frayed vest of uncertain pattern, worn over a bulging crimson shirt, been the cause of my not recognising the intrepid explorer on a certain occasion. One day I was drafting a mob of cattle in the Arkaba yard, a sharp voice with a Scottish accent accosted me from the fence, when I turned to see a pallid pasty-looking face, crossed by a heavy moustache, and roofed in with a dirty cabbage-tree hat, peering between the rails (Mudie; 41).*

Bruce also noted Stuart's passion for whiskey:

*It was perhaps fortunate for Stuart that Angus G was at the station when he arrived, for Frank M was from home and I never invested in whiskey, therefore the explorer might have had what he might have considered a dry welcome, but for Angus, as it was a vera wat nicht resulted fra' the meeting, and baith got unco' fu'. ... As I had my hands full of work about that time I didna wait to feenish the whusky, but left the two Scots to dae it. Anyhow, baith had sair heads the morn (Mudie; 42).*

### **Expedition 3: April 1859 - 3 months**

Stuart's party was comprised of David Herrgott, the botanist who had been with Babbage, Louis Muller, the stockman, and Campbell who returned to Chambers Creek with dispatches for government before the end of the expedition.

They went north to Lake Eyre in search of fresh water further northward. Herrgott found an artesian spring which Stuart named after him. The party followed a network of springs through to Chambers Creek. From Chambers Creek, he turned north-west.

By mid-June he was 100 miles from his goal, the northern border of South Australia. At a spring in the bed of the Davenport he found plentiful water and had ample food supplies, but his horses needed shoes and the party had no more. Stuart had to turn back, but he was happy that he had found an all-weather stock route. His journal entry reads:

*At five miles came upon a beautiful spring in the bed of the creek, for which I am truly thankful. I have named this "The Spring of Hope". It is a little brackish, not from salt, but soda, and runs a good stream of water. I have lived upon far worse water than this: to me it is of the utmost importance, and keeps my retreat open. I can go from here to Adelaide any time of the year and in any sort of season (Mudie; 60).*

#### **Expedition 4: November 1859 - 9 months**

Chambers had a new ambition to see the continent crossed from south to north. The unexplored portion was only 600 miles, for Stuart's farthest camp was 500 miles from Adelaide and Gregory had explored Victoria River on his north Australian expedition.

Chambers went to the government for help. He asked for £1,000 to equip the party and a promise of £5,000 if the expedition was successful.

At the same time, the South Australian government was competing with the governments of New South Wales and Western Australia to be the Australian terminal for the extension of telegraph cable from India. The government offered a reward of £2,000 to the first person to cross the continent and find an overland route for the telegraph.

Stuart set out for Chambers Creek with six men to explore new runs. Throughout the summer he marked out boundaries and water holes covering 8,000 square miles. His vision was beginning to suffer from the glare and flies were an "everlasting torment" (Pike; 15). His men complained about various conditions, and Stuart viewed them with contempt for what he considered a lack of fortitude. He did like William Kekwick whom he described as "everything I could wish a man to be".

After working on half-rations for some time, the men rebelled and Stuart led them back to Chambers Creek where he released them and sent Kekwick to find new men and horses. Kekwick returned with 13 horses, one man, Benjamin Head, and rations for three months.

They again left Chambers Creek in March 1860 with the centre of the continent their goal. Rain destroyed most of their rations and by the time they reached Neales Creek they were on half-rations. This disgusted the rotund Head, who joined the expedition weighing between 16-18 stone.

The party pushed northward with water becoming scarce, although water was found for the horses each day. The night camps were mostly dry. The men began to show signs of scurvy and Stuart was losing the use of his right eye. On 4 April they reached a "beautiful creek" which Stuart named the Finke River after his friend William Finke. Its course led them across the South Australian border to an interesting geological formation which he described as "a pillar of sandstone" and named Chambers' Pillar, and then on to a mountain range which he named the MacDonnell Ranges after the South Australian Governor, Sir Richard MacDonnell.

Further north he reached another range where he

found a permanent rock hole. This he named Anna's Reservoir after Chambers' youngest daughter. After another 20 miles, on 22 April 1860, Stuart's journal records:

*Today I find from my observation. . .that I am now camped in the Centre of Australia. I have marked a tree and planted the British flag in the centre. There is a high mount about two miles to the NNE which I hoped would be in the centre but on it tomorrow I will raise a cone of stones and plant the Flag there and will name it Mount Sturt after my excellent and esteemed commander of the expedition in 1844 and 45, Captain Sturt, as a mark of gratitude for the great kindness I received from him during that journey (Mudie;105).*

The name of this mountain was later changed to Central Mount Stuart, although who is responsible for the change is not known. Chambers is the prime suspect of historians, but this is speculative. In any event, Stuart was aware of the change because he referred to the landmark as Central Mount Stuart during his expedition of 1860-61.

As the party tried to forge northward, they were forced back time after time. Stuart was ill from scurvy and his gums were badly affected. Head had shrunk to half his weight and was constantly ill. Kekwick assumed the majority of heavy work. Despite these setbacks, Stuart would not consider returning to Adelaide.

On 22 May 1860, it rained in central Australia. The party turned northward, finding fresh water each day, some of it permanent. After 200 miles, they reached a gum creek which Stuart named Tennant's Creek (now called Tennant Creek) after John Tennant of Port Lincoln, where they made a depot. They headed northwest and, after four days without a drop of water, returned to Tennant's Creek where the horses needed a week to recover. Again, they headed north where Stuart named Kekwick Ponds, but beyond that was impenetrable scrub. When even Kekwick complained, Stuart reluctantly turned south.

On 26 June, he discovered another creek, but local Aborigines were suspicious and hostile. They raided Stuart's camp, and one apparently stole the shoeing rasp which Stuart recovered by force. The Aborigines set fire to grass surrounding the camp and threw boomerangs at the horses. Stuart later named the place Attack Creek and departed, followed by the Aborigines, at night.

Two months later, in August 1860, the party arrived, starved and sick, at Chambers Creek. Stuart was again rewarded by the Royal Geographical Society, this time with the Patron's Medal. Pike noted that before Stuart, Dr David Livingstone was the only

person to win double honours from that society. The South Australian government's recognition of Stuart was better on this occasion. In October of that year he was presented with two modern rifles at a public banquet. He was invited to Government House from where Sir Richard MacDonnell, the Governor, reported to London that Stuart had found the key to Australia's interior. One newspaper urged the government to give Stuart the £2,000 reward because only 200 miles separated Attack Creek from Gregory's explored country in the north. The government did not share that view and Stuart was not granted the reward.

Following this expedition, Chambers put another plan to the South Australian Government, this time asking for funding for Stuart and Kekwick to return to northern Australia with an armed escort for their protection because of events at Attack Creek. The Government, reminiscent of most governments, was concerned about the cost of an escort and wanted to take control of the expedition. It also wanted a botanist and a geologist to lead the party.

At the same time, the Victorian Government had provided Burke and Wills with £12,000 for their proposed expedition across the country. Burke and Wills were already at the Darling River with their party. Inter-colonial rivalry was intense, so the South Australian government offered Stuart 10 armed men and £2,500, agreeing to leave all arrangements to Stuart. In return, he handed over the maps of his most recent expedition.

### **Expedition 5: January 1861 - 8 months**

Stuart departed Chambers Creek with 11 men. Five of them knew the country; the others were inexperienced. They took rations for 30 weeks on 46 horses, about half of which were used to conditions in the north. Stuart quickly sent two men back, along with the two worst horses.

There had been little rain in the central area and at both Neales Creek and the Finke River, they had to dig for water. At the MacDonnell Ranges, the water shortage was solved by heavy rain.

The party reached Attack Creek on 24 April 1861. There was no sign of the Aboriginal people who had proved hostile on the last occasion. Stuart ordered the party to rest and, with two men, set out to challenge the scrub that had defeated him two years earlier. After a week, he managed to find a way through although the ground was treacherous for the horses. He discovered plains which he named after Charles Sturt and returned to Attack Creek.

With fresh horses and men he headed for some hills he had seen. They travelled through dense scrub

and finally found permanent water after 50 miles. The main party was assembled here and ordered to make a new depot. In the ensuing two weeks, Stuart made three attempts to cross the Sturt Plains, all of which were unsuccessful and during which he covered 300 miles. He decided that he would have to head north to skirt the plains.

On 23 May he came across a water hole 150 yards wide and four miles long. He named it Glandfield Lagoon after the Mayor of Adelaide. Mayor Glandfield later allegedly committed indiscretions, and the lagoon was renamed Newcastle Water after the Duke of Newcastle who was Secretary of State for the Colonies (the place is now known as Newcastle Waters). Stuart ordered his party to assemble here.

When the main party arrived, local Aborigines appeared and menaced them by starting fires around the camp area and nuisancing the horses. Stuart took to standing a guard at the camp and Aboriginal people were kept at bay by warning shots if they approached.

During the following five weeks, Stuart continued to tackle the Sturt Plains, but on each occasion, the plains won. It appeared they could be neither crossed nor skirted. On 1 July 1861, he told his men to prepare for home. They reached Moolooloo, Chambers' headquarters, in September.

On returning to Adelaide from his fifth expedition, Stuart learned that Burke and Wills were missing. He offered to search for them, but rescue teams had already departed. Two months later came the news that the explorers and their party had perished. Politicians began to question the prudence of any further exploration. They acknowledged that Stuart had found a way across five-sixths of the continent without losing a man, but no good country or minerals had been found and the indigenous people were a threat to exploration parties.

With or without government support, Stuart planned to make another attempt in a month. Shopkeepers gave him food, clothes and medicine and he had a ready selection of volunteers to form his party. At the last minute, the South Australian government granted him £2,000 on the proviso that he take a scientist with him. FG Waterhouse was added to the party and was to prove a constant irritant to his leader.

### **Expedition 6: October 1861 - 15 months**

Only a month after returning from his fifth expedition, Stuart's party left Adelaide on 26 October. Stuart's hand had been crushed in an accident involving a horse, and he eventually lost the use of it, so he remained in Adelaide for a time while his party continued on its way. He joined them at

Moolooloo.

The party consisted of Thring, Keckwick, Auld, King, Frew, Nash, Billiatt, Jeffries, the saddler, and McGorrerey, the farrier. John Woodforde was also a member, although he left the party following a disagreement with Stuart after a few hundred miles and returned to the settled districts. The government-appointed scientist, Waterhouse, also accompanied the expedition. Ben Head wanted to accompany Stuart, and Stuart was happy to have him, but he was too ill from the previous expedition. They had 71 horses: one for each of the men to ride, the remainder of which were pack horses.

On 5 April 1862, Stuart's party reached Newcastle Water. There had been periodic forays into the party's camps by Aborigines along the way, but at Newcastle Water, Aboriginal people tried to harry the party by lighting grass fires around the camp. Security was again imposed.

After a week's rest Stuart and two others headed north. Within two days they had found permanent water and the party was assembled at it. Then Stuart headed for the Victoria River with Thring and King, both highly regarded bushmen. They managed to make it half-way across the Sturt Plains before turning back. Four more attempts in other directions failed. Stuart headed north and slowed his travel rate. Each day the party found small ponds of water and Stuart named them after members of the party. These names were later changed to the names of members of the South Australian parliament.

Finally, they reached Daly Waters which Stuart named after the new Governor of South Australia. The main party joined them four days later. Stuart made another unsuccessful attempt to get to Victoria River by crossing the Sturt Plains. Two weeks later, on 9 June 1862, they came to country that had been mapped by Gregory.

On 1 July, Stuart thought he had reached a tributary of the Adelaide River. He named it the Mary River after one of Chambers' daughters. The country improved as they made their way down Strangways Creek to the Roper River, which they crossed. They followed a tributary, Chambers River, in a north-west direction. Two hundred miles was all that remained between the party and Adelaide River, which had been explored by Lieutenant Helpman in a boat. Of those, 150 miles were along the River Chambers which brought new problems of swamps, mosquitos and rank grass which made the horses ill. A u l d was later to recall:

*...our minor troubles, the ants, the sandflies, the common flies, and the mosquitoes... From the time we struck the Roper until we left it, the*

*mosquitoes and flies were terrible. Our hands, wrists, necks and feet were all blistered with their bites, and many earnest inquiries were made as to who could explain their use in this world. One of the party thought they were sent to teach a man how to swear fluently.*

On 24 July 1862 Thring and Stuart, scouting ahead of the party, received their ultimate reward, the northern coast of Australia. Stuart was first on to the beach. Pike wrote:

*He struggled across its soft blue mud and washed his hands and face in the Indian Ocean.*

Stuart's journal entry for that day refers to himself as "being very unwell" but not feeble and struggling, although his health was to deteriorate. Thring could hardly contain his excitement and shouted "The sea! The sea!" to the others. Stuart wrote:

*At length understanding what was meant they commenced cheering at a terrible rate which lasted some time.*

The next day, the party cleared a space around a tree and nailed a Union Jack to its highest branch. Across the centre of the flag was Stuart's name, embroidered months earlier by Elizabeth Chambers. A paper bearing the party's names and signatures was buried in an air-tight tin case at the foot of the tree. The paper read:

*South Australian Great Northern Exploring Expedition.*

*The exploring party, under the command of John McDouall Stuart, arrived at this spot on the 25th day of July 1862 having crossed the entire Continent of Australia from the Southern to the Indian Ocean, passing through the Centre. They left the City of Adelaide on the 26th [it was, in fact, the 25th] day of October 1861 and the most northern station of the colony on the 21st day of January 1862. To commemorate this happy event, they have raised this flag bearing his name. All well. God save the Queen! (Webster; 233).*

Stuart's journal recorded naming the bay:

*Elizabeth Bay in honour of Miss Chambers who kindly presented me with the flag which I have planted on this day . . .*

The name of the bay was later changed - by whom is not clear - to Chambers Bay. This area was later unofficially named Point Stuart. The name remains today, although it has never been gazetted.

Nine months after leaving Adelaide, the party

turned for home. The horses were in poor condition and some were left behind where water was plentiful. Stuart was extremely ill and becoming worse by the day: he was sick with scurvy, nearly blind and could hardly ride his horse. Kekwick was appointed leader and Thring, on his faithful mount Gloag, was charged with leading the party back to Adelaide. Auld was responsible for taking their position and was Stuart's primary nurse during his illness. King scouted ahead looking for water, McGorrerey remained responsible for shoeing the horses and Billiatt remained responsible for cooking what scant rations remained.

Stuart became so ill in Central Australia that the party shot a horse for meat and had to string a hammock between two horses because he was unable to ride at all and was convinced that he would die. On 18 October, Stuart's condition worsened:

*While taking a drink of water, I was seized with a violent fit of vomiting blood and mucus, which lasted about five minutes and has nearly killed me . . . I have kept King and Nash with me in case of my dying during the night, as it would be lonely for one young man to be there by himself. Wind south-east.*

Auld was later to recall:

*I am quite unnerved when I speak of Stuart, when I look back and remember the terrible pain he suffered . . . We thought we had hard work to reach the coast, but the return trip was tenfold more anxious for us. Our leader's health broken up, waters were drying up rapidly, but every man of us determined to do his part to bring our leader back alive to Adelaide . . . Ill as he was, the agonies he suffered, still he went on for the sake of his party's safety . . . Stuart was the king of the Australian explorers.*

Other party members were suffering, too. They were close to starving, although King attributed the fact that most of them escaped the effects of scurvy to the portulaca and acacia gum, plants they boiled and ate whenever they could find them. Waterhouse, being older, was losing strength because of the restricted rations. Stuart became abusive to Waterhouse, which most members of the party felt was irrational and unwarranted. This could be attributed to his condition because he later spoke highly of the scientist, although their relationship was always strained.

On 27 November 1862, the party came upon Mount Margaret run in South Australia.

*...Old George, one of Stephen Jarvis' hands on Mount Margaret run, saw ten gaunt and ragged men, one of them carried on a litter, heading a*

*string of limping, emaciated horses, come riding slowly, wearily, triumphantly, out of the mirage that filled the empty north. The Commander of the South Australian Great Northern Exploring Expedition, along with his faithful companions, had returned ... (Mudie; 234).*

The party had departed with 71 horses. When they returned, they had 48, some of which were horses they had left behind on other expeditions and recovered on their return trip.

By the time they reached Chambers Creek, Stuart was back in his saddle. The 14-year-old son of GC Hawker, a station owner, wrote in 1864 of Stuart's return:

*Oh, he is such a funny little man, he is always drunk. You won't be able to have him at your house. Papa couldn't. Do you know, once, when he got to one of Papa's stations, on coming off one of his long journeys, he shut himself up in a room, and was drunk for three days. (Mudie; 43).*

On 21 January 1863, the party arrived in Adelaide. The government proclaimed a holiday and crowds lined the streets. Banners and flags were hung from buildings. The dishevelled party made its way through the streets to be honoured at a public banquet.

*The day of the greatest sorrowing and of the greatest rejoicing in the history of Australian exploration was 21st January 1863. In Melbourne, thousands stood bareheaded as the remains of Burke and Wills, who had set out from that city with a great company twenty-seven months before, passed on their way to burial. In Adelaide, where men chucked their hats in the air, and women blew kisses, the scene was very different. A hairy, undersized skeleton of a man, his bush clothing in tatters, rode in triumph at the head of the equally ragged little group who for the rest of their lives would refer to themselves as 'the companions of Stuart'.*

*The decorated streets of the South Australian capital were not, as were the sombre streets of Melbourne, silent. Bands played, and the greatest crowd ever seen in the twenty-six-year-old colony cheered, and cheered again until the waves of sound rolled for miles across the plains, as the party, with their team of gaunt packhorses, passed in procession down the main street.*

*After suffering many privations, and risking death from the spears of hostile Aborigines, John McDouall Stuart and his nine companions had done what many had thought impossible; they had crossed the vastness of the Australian continent*

*along its central line, south to north and back again, from sea to sea, following a more or less direct route from Adelaide to the distant ocean. And now the heroes had returned . . .” (Mudie; 1).*

Following the return of Stuart's sixth and final expedition group to Adelaide, the government gave Kekwick £500, Thring and Auld £200 and the others £100 each in addition to their weekly pay of 20/-. Waterhouse had his salary of £400. In April 1865 Stuart received the reward of £2000, which he requested be paid as £200 cash “to pay off some tradesmen's accounts” with the balance being paid to three Trustees - Finke, Bonney and Neales - who invested it in mortgages which provided an income of £162 per year, which was extremely difficult for Stuart or anyone else to live on.

Charles Sturt, who had retired in England, received a £600 per year pension from the South Australian government, yet his success was moderate by comparison with Stuart.

James Chambers had died and William Finke was ill in Adelaide. Stuart was lonely and restless. He could not ride, read or sleep. Nearly blind, his hand crippled, he travelled to England in April 1864 to recover his strength. There he lived with his sister and her husband in London.

He never recovered his health, sight or the use of his right hand.

*Within a year or two he was to suffer confusion of mind, ‘obfuscation’, loss of memory, decline of the power to spell conventionally, and, it seems, difficulty of speech, and he was later to be described as having been ‘half foolish’ (Mudie; 229).*

In 1865, the Royal Geographical Society asked the South Australian government to give Stuart more money. Parliament resolved that a sum:

*... not exceeding £1,000, ... be paid to John McDouall Stuart, as recognition of his great service to the Australian community by his exploration of the continent, and in consideration of the permanent injury his health has sustained in the service of the province (Mudie; 279).*

Stuart attended an Australian reunion in Glasgow in 1865 at which he declined a request to speak because

*... he had quite broken down. He said that his eyesight and his memory had so far gone that he was unable to compose a speech or, indeed, to recollect many of the incidents that happened throughout the course of his explorations (Mudie; 281).*

John McDouall Stuart died on 5 June 1866 in London and was buried at Kensal Green. Seven people - two from the Geographic Society, four relatives and Alexander Hay, after whom Stuart named Mount Hay in Central Australia - attended his funeral.

Stuart's death certificate said that the cause of death was “softening and degeneration of the brain with a final cerebral haemorrhage”. The softening and degeneration of the brain is indicative of dementia and is consistent with *tuberculosis*. Further, it is possible that Stuart suffered *atherosclerosis*, a hardening of the arteries usually associated with smoking but possibly related to his prolonged vitamin deficiency. His medical profile could also point to *syphillus*, although there is no evidence to support either theory. It appears to be a matter of ‘folklore fact’ that Stuart was an alcoholic. I can find no evidence to support this. Certainly there are references to celebrations upon his return from each of the expeditions, but this is not evidence of an alcoholic and, clearly, the man was capable of going for extended periods without consuming alcohol.

Stuart's headstone in Kensal Green Cemetery in England was erected by his sister, Mary Turnbull. The last line of the inscription implies that Mrs Turnbull felt it necessary to inform the public that her brother was not buried or paid any tribute by the governments of either South Australia or England:

**TO THE MEMORY  
OF JOHN McDOUALL STUART  
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN EXPLORER  
THE FIRST WHO CROSSED THE  
CONTINENT FROM THE SOUTH TO THE  
INDIAN OCEAN  
BORN 1815; DIED 1866  
ERECTED BY HIS SISTER**

Stuart's headstone was damaged in bombing raids over London during World War II but can apparently still be read.

Benjamin Head was later to recall Stuart's prowess in the bush:

*You could not beat him. You could not beat the little fellow, no matter who it might be. He had the instincts of a bushman. However foolish he may have been in town, there is not a man in Australia can say a word against him as a leader in the bush. He knew his way about if any man did. He was a born leader of men; the sharpest little fellow you would find in a year's march. There were no flies about Stuart, take my word for that, and Pat's [Pat Auld] and, indeed, any man who went out with*

*him, he was a born explorer ... Stuart was a splendid bushman, and could tell within a foot almost where we were. I never came across the like of him. He was not always straight in town, but steady enough in the bush (Mudie; 178).*

Adelaide became the terminal of the Overland Telegraph Line which followed Stuart's route with two exceptions: a deviation through the MacDonnell Ranges and a diversion from the Mary River near Point Stuart to Darwin. The north and south cables were joined at Central Mount Stuart in August 1872.

RR Knuckey who worked under Charles Todd, the Superintendent of Telegraphs in Adelaide, had this to say about Stuart in a letter to the press in respect of the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line:

*... mark his exactitude. He was simply a marvel for horseback traverse. His map was so correct that we used simply to put a protractor and scale on it, get the bearings and distance and ride on with the same confidence as one would ride from Gawler to Adelaide. If we did not find the old JMDS tree we never thought Stuart was out but that we had made the mistake, and we always found it (Webster; 270).*

Harvey, a surveyor on the OT Line, said that when his survey maps differed from Stuart's he was:

*... never quite sure but that Stuart was right and I was wrong. Anyone travelling to the Northern Territory, having Stuart's diary with the country described so accurately could not possibly make a mistake . . . I consider he was the king of our explorers (Webster; 270).*

Stuart's extraordinary success was not recognised until 1904 when Adelaide's Caledonian Society unveiled his monument in Victoria Square

*With map, saddle, gun and water-bag he stands there in stone today, still facing north, where the transcontinental highway now bears his name (Pike; 30).*

Stuart's companions boycotted the unveiling because they thought that the Governor of the colony should have presided. Instead, it was handled by the Caledonian Society alone (Mudie; 273).

Members of Stuart's parties pursued a variety of careers but managed to attend an annual reunion of the Companions of Stuart in Adelaide:

William Keckwick died in Adelaide in 1872. He was 49.

The baby of Stuart's final expedition, James Frew, died in 1877 at the age of 34.

John (Jack) McGorrerey, the farrier, suffered dementia and died in an Adelaide Hospital for the Insane.

John Billiatt, the cook, married Stephen King's sister, Ann, and eventually retired to England where he died in 1919. He was the last surviving member of Stuart's final party.

Stephen King continued to explore in the Northern Territory, where he contracted malaria and was forced to return to southern climes. He died in Adelaide in 1915.

WP (Pat) Auld returned to the Northern Territory with Stephen King in 1864 and took the first bullock dray up the Adelaide River. He died shortly after the 50th anniversary of Stuart's final expedition in 1912.

Heath Nash returned to Adelaide and died in Adelaide Hospital in 1913 aged 75 years.

The scientist, FG Waterhouse, was appointed Curator of the Adelaide Museum. He died at Magill in 1898 aged 83 years.

Benjamin Head, who did not accompany Stuart on his final expedition because of illness caused by the previous expedition, died in Adelaide in March 1897.

A monument to John McDouall Stuart also stands in Raintree Park in Darwin.

It is noteworthy that the greatest danger in exploration was clashing with Aboriginal people who were understandably suspicious of and hostile to white men. Stuart was a very liberal man for his time because he never referred to Aboriginal people as "savages", a word often used by his contemporaries. He constantly referred to Aboriginal people as "natives" and gave humorous accounts of their meetings and attempts at communication. He often referred to the physical characteristics of Aboriginal men he encountered and expressed admiration for their bravery and protection of their families.

During his career, he encountered hostility from some Aboriginal groups but issued standing orders that only warning shots were to be fired and that under no circumstances other than self-defence was any member of his party to fire upon Aboriginal people. There is no evidence to suggest that any member of any of Stuart's parties killed an Aboriginal person.

John McDouall Stuart's contribution to Australian exploration cannot be overstated. The basis of Australia's modern telecommunications system, the Overland Telegraph, followed Stuart's route almost exactly and provided Australia's first opportunity to communicate with Europe by cable rather than by mail, which took months. Anyone driving the Stuart Highway between Adelaide and Darwin today cannot help but wonder at the determination, doggeness and endurance of the little Scotsman.



*Some of the Companions of Stuart*

### References

Mudie, I  
*The Heroic Journey of John McDouall Stuart*  
Angus & Robertson: Sydney 1968

Pike, D  
*Australian Explorers: John McDouall Stuart*  
Oxford University Press: Sydney 1958

Webster, M  
*John McDouall Stuart*  
Melbourne University Press: Melbourne 1958

\* **Robyn Smith** is Bachelor of Arts (Journalism and Anthropology) and a Master of Cultural Heritage. Note - I am indebted to Dr Brian Reid for his medical assistance.

Reproduction of this material is permitted for non-commercial purposes providing appropriate acknowledgement is given to the author.

**Page 1 colour portrait:** This portrait of Stuart hangs in the Council Chambers in Adelaide and is available for public viewing.

**Page 1 black and white portrait:** Some of the Companions of Stuart (same portrait as above).