



William John Wills: Pioneer of the Australian Outback

John Van der Kiste

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In 1860 the Australian outback remained all but unknown to the European settlers. A prize of ?2,000 was offered by the Exploration Committee of the Royal Society of Victoria for the first expedition successfully to cross the country from Melbourne to the north coast. The Burke & Wills Expedition, led by Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills, a Totnes-born surveyor who had emigrated to Australia at the age of 18 and worked as a shepherd, a gold-digger and an assistant surgeon, set out in August 1860. The journey was arduous and slow, so much so that, once they reached Cooper's Creek, Burke, Wills and two others made a dash for the coast with only three months' food; they made it, but on the way back, after killing and eating their camels when their supplies ran out, they discovered that the men who stayed at Cooper's Creek had left only 9 hours earlier. Unable to reach civilisation, Wills died of exhaustion and malnourishment in June 1861; only one member of the expedition made it back to Melbourne alive. John Van der Kiste's biography of Wills is the first full account of his life, including his upbringing in Devon as well as the expedition itself.

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