There are numerous birds along the waterholes especially early in the morning, and at dusk. These include corellas, galahs, pelicans, martins, kites and a couple of wedge-tail eagles. Passing a stockyard, a wild dog was glimpsed drinking from a trough before it raced away. No ducks were seen, paddling or flying, though plentiful at times in 1861. One lunchtime on the bank of the (very dry) Strzelecki Creek a group of dry black native hens landed a few metres away but took off almost immediately. Some crows flew by, in 1861, John King shot a few and gave them to the Yandruwandha. The land that defeated Burke and Wills sustained the Aboriginal people of the area for thousands of years. Charles Sturt in 1845 had described them ‘...as fine men and women...’. There were still a few yellow and white spring flowers which magically transform the arid ground. Photos: Pip McNaught

One would have supposed that the exploration of Australia by Europeans could be compared to a Western story with the irascible Burke as leader. Their deaths were tragic, and it was a fatal success. William Wills has also increased. It would be easy to get lost even today without a guide, as the land seems quite disorienting with long distances of scrub, stones and sand. The days went by. I found the sand dunes of soft bright red grains difficult to climb, and I was not leading camels or horses. There were still a few yellow and white spring flowers which magically transform the arid ground.

The story of Burke and Wills is one of the most famous events in the history of Australian exploration. Considering the miscalculations and the misfortune that dogged the expedition, it could be regarded as one of the most notorious. In 1860, ‘the interior’ of Australia was unknown to the white inhabitants of Victoria. It could be seen as akin to sending a man to the Moon in the 1960s. Some blame Robert Burke for his decisions: he was judged ‘reckless and daring’, though he also had his supporters. Mary Stawell in her memoirs of Melbourne in the 1850s remembered a good dancer and a charming man she and her friends called ‘Brian Bore’. When the Comte de Beaucourt visited Melbourne in 1866, he marvelled at the execution and size of the bronze statue of Burke and Wills by Charles Sumners. He noted that their fate was still the topic of conversation, and many people shed tears as they spoke of the tragic deaths. Perhaps the response to their deaths can be compared, in our time, to the outpouring of grief and emotion after the deaths of Princess Diana or Steve Irwin.

My understanding of the Burke and Wills saga has been enriched by my visit to the places with physical links to the explorers. My admiration for the accomplishments of William Wills has also increased. It would be easy to get lost even today without a guide, as the land seems quite disorienting with long distances of scrub, stones and sand with some steep sandhills. It is difficult to imagine the weeks of hardship and exhaustion with no recourse to an air-conditioned vehicle or place of rest. The outcome of the expedition could so easily have been a huge success, even with the irascible Burke as leader. Their deaths were tragic, but they reached their goal of crossing the continent. Sadly, it was a fatal success.

Pip McNaught
Curator, Creating a Country

GALLERy DEVELOPMENT

Rolf Harris AND HIS WOBBLEBOARD

If I mentioned Rolf Harris I wonder how many of you would start humming ‘The Me Kangaroo Down Sport’. Rolf Harris left Australia in 1952 to pursue art studies in London and for the past 50 years he has forged a career in art, music, television and performance, making him one of Australia’s best known exports. He has had number one hits, been on some of the longest running TV shows in the UK, performed to thousands at both the Glastonbury Festival and Albert Hall, painted an official portrait of Queen Elizabeth II and been inducted into the ARIA Hall of Fame. With the opening of Australian Journeys Rolf Harris will also have a presence at the National Museum of Australia.

Australian Journeys explores connections between people and places here in Australia and overseas. The exhibit on Rolf Harris considers the broader history of young Australians moving overseas, especially to London, in the 1950s and 1960s. The flow of Australian tourists to Britain and the continent is not a recent phenomenon. The desire to either return to their ancestral homeland or the time of early British settlement of Australia. People travelled to Britain for work, education, leisure and society. While the Second World War put a stop to tourism, the postwar years saw an explosion in tourism as a viable leisure activity and developing market. Increased availability of travel from the 1960s onwards meant more Australians were travelling overseas. Further, opportunities were opening up across class and gender lines: no longer was travel limited to the more wealthy of the middle classes. Growing affluence allowed more and more people to satiate their itchy feet and curiosity to see the world.

One of the items that will be on display is the very ‘individually’ instrument, the wobbleboard. The wobbleboard is a musical instrument accidentally discovered and then popularised by Rolf Harris. The link between Rolf’s painting, music and performance is the key to the history of the wobbleboard. Rolf discovered the wobbleboard when trying to dry a piece of hardboard on which he was painting a portrait of magician Robert Harbin. According to an interview on Enough Rope in 2003:

I was painting a portrait of a very dear friend of mine... I had a sheet of hardboard which had got some paint dropped on it. I quickly ran it through a wobbleboard. It was virtually unrecognizable. I thought it could work in a band. I set about designing a machine that wobbled up and down. I worked to try and get the amount of wobble up and down. I was due to arrive in about half an hour and I was thinking ‘I’ll try this wobbleboard’.

I was going to use the wobbleboard later on in my ‘Rolfaroo’. I continued to play with it and I thought, ‘My God, this really is a rhythm instrument’. The ‘Rolfaroo’ is a caricature he has drawn for many years, depicting Harris’ head on the body of a kangaroo. The stairway references Rolf’s version of ‘Stairway to Heaven’ which he performed on the 1993 television show, ‘The Money or the Gun’ and began a type of Rolf Harris revival.

Another wobbleboard in Australian Journeys was manufactured by the Masonite company in the 1960s and marketed as ‘A new rhythm instrument’. Unfortunately this venture met with limited success. It turned out most people were unable to attain the right motion for the wobbleboard to sound.

The two wobbleboards, along with a leather jacket worn by Rolf Harris during his 1990s Rolf Rules Tour, were donated to the National Historical Collection by Rolf Harris. They add significantly to the National Historical Collection’s holdings around Australian performers and popular culture and will provide a point of musical interest and connection for visitors to Australian Journeys.

Laina Hall
Curator, gallery Development

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