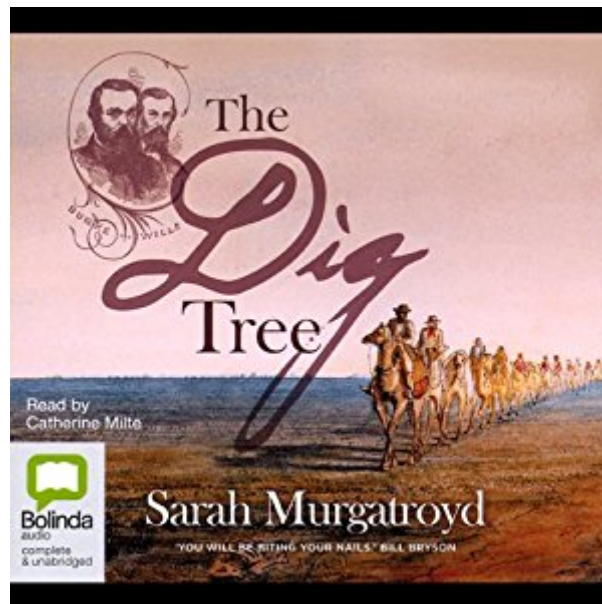


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The Dig Tree: A True Story Of Bravery, Insanity, And The Race To Discover Australia's Wild Frontier



Synopsis

In 1860, an eccentric Irish police officer named Robert O'Hara Burke led a cavalcade of camels, wagons and men out of Melbourne. Accompanied by William Wills, a shy English scientist, he was prepared to risk everything to become the first European to cross the Australian continent. A few months later, an ancient coolibah tree at Cooper Creek bore a strange carving: 'Dig Under 3ft NW'. Burke, Wills and five other men were dead. The expedition had become an astonishing tragedy. Sarah Murgatroyd reveals new historical and scientific evidence to tell the story of the disaster with all its heroism and romance, its discoveries, coincidences, and lost opportunities. This is a spell-binding book.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Australia's desolate interior evokes much legend. Dominating the legends are the traverses of European explorers in the region. Among these legends, that of Burke and Wills retains a lofty status, one Sarah Murgatroyd may have forever toppled. She has given the tradition of explorer heroics a strenuous airing with this book. Few reputations are left unsmirched, but her real assault centres on the incompetence of the expedition's leader, Robert O'Hara Burke. The author relates how Burke left Melbourne, Victoria, in 1860 with several ambitions, muddled instructions and devoid of capabilities to manage the task. Behind his straggling team were a cabal of businessmen intent on extending Victoria's borders. Beyond that, they also hoped to initiate a telegraph line route to Asia, thence to London. In competition with Adelaide to the west, both cities had sponsored expeditions to traverse the continent from south to north. Others had made the attempt, but the

travails of crossing a land intolerant of blundering had thwarted them all. Burke was aware of a major competitor in the figure of Charles McDouall Stuart who had nearly succeeded before turning back. Burke, among other things, saw the enterprise as a race - which he intended to win. Murgatroyd demonstrates how that aspect, among others, doomed the expedition from the beginning. Burke's undue haste led to launching the trek at the worst time of year. He quarreled with subordinates, sacked members of the team and scorned delays occasioned by scientific studies. His fatal error was in dividing the group, ultimately leaving most of his companions behind to make a dash to the northern sea. It was the fragmenting of the expedition that led to conflicting priorities and delays.

The late Sarah Murgatroyd has written a well researched and poignant account of this tragic expedition. Though I hesitate to use the word expedition, as it was poorly led and planned, perhaps a mad rush in the bush is a better description. Many times as a child I used to gaze at the statue of Burke and Wills, (Melbourne is my home town), when I visited the Museum and wondered how they died and why was that statue there. My schoolbooks portrayed them as tragic heroes, but I felt sorry for John King as these books seemed to minimize his achievement of survival. This book finally gives King the credit he deserves for his amazing survival and the tenacious ability he displayed to achieve this. Unfortunately his health was broken by the experience and he suffered much mental anguish for the remainder of his short life. This anguish, I suspect, derived from the charade he was forced to be a part of upon his return to Melbourne. He was very critical of the Exploration Committee on the way back to Melbourne after his rescue but was stunned by the reception he received in Victoria on the way back to Melbourne where he was lauded as some type of hero. It was just too much for this quiet and unassuming man. He had to play along and hold his true thoughts about the Exploration Committee to himself. He was up against too much public emotion and powerful interests to upset the applecart, I also believe he felt very guilty about his survival. This book captures the vastness and emptiness of the Australian interior and yet also describes the beauty of the outback. I have lived in the outback myself while working at remote weather stations. The description of the climate, landscape and vegetation of the part of the outback that the expedition traversed is concise and correct.

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