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Peta Jeffries

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LOCATING SETTLER COLONIALISM IN THE MYTHS OF BURKE AND WILLS – ABORIGINAL AND ISLAMIC PEOPLE’S INVOLVEMENT IN REIMAGINING SUCCESSFUL EXPLORATION OF INLAND AUSTRALIA

Dr Peta Jeffries*

Abstract: Within Australian settler colonial history, a process of ‘space-off’ in exploration cultural representations has created erasure and denial of Aboriginal and Islamic people’s involvement. The implications of this erasure are significant due to the legacy of the myth in maintaining particular views about the Australian inland landscape and the use and appropriation of Indigenous knowledge. Focusing on visual artwork of sociocultural productions associated with the 1860 Victorian Exploring Expedition (VEE), commonly referred to as “Burke and Wills”, this article identifies representations that reflect ongoing social and ecological knowledge of human relationships with nature. As a simple strategy to reimagine Australia’s myths, this article draws on visual artworks and other colonial era secondary sources, plus more recent literature associated with cameleer and Aboriginal histories, to identify representations of settler colonialism and erasure to highlight shared histories worthy of further research. This article examines the structural mechanism of space-off as a strategy to increase understanding of the ways in which settler colonialism pervades not only the national psyche, but also ways in which knowledge and culture are (re)produced based on “an appropriationist logic of domination.”¹ Highlighting the ways settler colonialism is maintained, in particular through processes of racialisation, space-off and particular history practices, this article contributes to the growing discipline of Australian Islamic studies and will support further research into shared histories of cross-cultural knowledge production.

Keywords: *reimagining myths; memorialisation; exploration history; space-off; settler colonialism; cameleers*

INTRODUCTION

The myth of Burke and Wills is a socio-cultural construction of these men as anti-heroes in order to legitimate non-Indigenous belonging and becoming on Indigenous land. Maintaining the myth of Burke and Wills as being unable or unwilling to listen to the advice of Yandruwandha people risks further appropriation and domination of Indigenous people,

* Dr Peta Jeffries works as a lecturer and researcher in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies, Charles Sturt University

¹ Donna Haraway, *Primate Beings: Gender, Race and Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 82.

their knowledges and their land. Understanding *how* the myths of Burke and Wills were established, and how it continues to operate, helps to identify ways to *reimagine*; therefore, this article does not aim to replace one myth of settler colonialism with another, but it aims to draw out what has been silenced or erased by explaining some of the processes of social-cultural knowledge production of these myths. Examining these cultural productions is the first step to reimagining – to telling new stories.² Reimagining national myths of settler colonialism is critical work related to “becoming with” nature and each other.³ To support *becoming with* a multispecies world,⁴ this paper is not simply Muslim history, or Indigenous Australian history, but it is a critical examination into how the myths of Burke and Wills were created and perpetuated. This *shared* ethnographic history is about how “nature remains a crucially important and deeply contested myth and reality”⁵ in and of itself and how these myths of Burke and Wills – through little or no fault of these actual men – result in further forms of “ecological denial.”⁶ It is beyond the scope of this article to critique themes of “gender and race and how these enable” particular understandings and approaches,⁷ rather, this article invites a *reimagining* of the myths identified in here. In this article, ‘*space-off*’ is used to describe how some key aspects of colonial exploration and settlement have been ignored or denied throughout the historical memorialisation of particular events.⁸ This article covers three broad themes to highlight specific shared histories worthy of further research or consideration. One is the theme of colonial history and settler colonialism. Another is the phenomena of space-off, which is drawn upon as a way to discuss ideas associated with space, erasure and representation. Further, the idea of knowledge co-production during scientific exploration will also be briefly considered.

This article draws on approaches related to spatial history and ethnographic history, which here involves the observation of social and cultural practices and interactions as presented in historical texts, and is situated within the theoretical discipline area of social sciences. The aim of the ethnographic historian⁹ is to systematically study a cultural phenomenon from the perspective of the subject – the “subject here is not a physical object but rather a cultural one,”¹⁰ it is *the myths of Burke and Wills*; the phenomenon is the *erasure* or *creation* of the myths, it is settler colonialism.¹¹ An ethnographic history is a presentation of historical and

² Ibid.

³ Donna Haraway, *Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Haraway, *Primate Beings*, 1.

⁶ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁷ Haraway, *Primate Beings*, 1.

⁸ Joseph Pugliese, “Biotologies of terrorism,” *Cultural Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (2008).

⁹ Rather than studying ‘exotic’ peoples, the ethnographic historian attempts to understand the archival, social and cultural records through ethnographic approaches.

¹⁰ Drawing from Paul Carter’s spatial history, see Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), xxii.

¹¹ This concept will be explained throughout the paper; however, it is drawing upon the work of Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*. (London: Cassell, 1999); and the spatial history work of Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*.

cultural artefacts and symbols, which are then interpreted and woven into meaning¹² by the historian; it is a performance,¹³ which reflects knowledges and systems of meaning.¹⁴ This article is not so much a completed ethnographic history, but more of a plan or call for a particular kind of history – as a form of truth-telling.¹⁵ By drawing upon archival memories, visual art, news media and various secondary sources from the disciplines of history, sociology, and anthropology, included here is a discussion on the processes of silencing and erasure of versions of history with some consideration around why this erasure may be an issue.

The significance of this article exists in the fact that, although it is commonly accepted Burke and Wills perished due to their ignorance of Indigenous peoples' knowledges and their lands, this is not the subject or myths of focus here. Rather, the focus is on the structures and mechanisms that maintain these myths and the reasons behind it. The purpose of this article is to address the lack of critical scholarly examination of: these social-cultural productions; why they have been created and are continually maintained and re-told; how the narrative operates; the structures and ideologies that maintain them; and the identification of any avenues for reimagining. The myths we live by maintain relationships with nature and simply replacing one hero narrative with another is not sufficient. It is also not enough to make this about race – or of “white” versus “black”. However, by accepting the multicultural reality of the expedition and identifying the cultural mechanisms through which the myth is perpetuated it becomes possible to begin examining, recollecting and relearning how “to flourish in the face of this history.”¹⁶ The lesson to be learnt from the myths of Burke and Wills is that these myths were socially and culturally constructed *after* the historical event. The continued focus on these men as anti-heroes is *settler colonialism* and any desire to replace this hero narrative with another is simply a desire to appropriate Indigenous land and resources. To discuss these themes, some historiography is required to contextualise the chosen approach and content of this article.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS THE MYTH? “OPENING UP THE HEART OF THIS NATION”

The myths of Burke and Wills are not untruths as such, but stories that have been told and continue to be told, typically, to make sense of non-Indigenous becoming in Australia. These two famous Australian inland explorers have been remembered and memorialised as the first non-Indigenous people to travel from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The ongoing memorialisation is focused on the fact they perished in the semi-arid landscape near the centre of Australia, in Yandruwandha country, at a location that is today known as Cooper

¹² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹³ Greg Dening, *Performances* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

¹⁵ Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth-telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Books, 2010).

¹⁶ Haraway, *Making Kin*, 120.

Creek in South Australia.¹⁷ What makes this history so compelling and why they have retained interest for so long¹⁸ is that they perished.¹⁹ At that time, in 1861, more than 120,000 residents of Victoria paid their respects²⁰ with 40,000-100,000 mourners participating in a great funeral procession, making it “one of the great spectacles of colonial Australia”²¹ (see Figure 1.) A monumental bronze sculpture²² was commissioned and unveiled in Melbourne in 1865, which demonstrates “how much meaning Australia’s colonists attached to the explorers as symbols of their identity as a pioneering people than the apotheosis of Burke and Wills.”²³ This memorialisation and commemoration of Burke and Wills as heroes was, in the 19th century, a key mechanism of settler colonialism.²⁴

The memorials and commemorations were captured by more than just this funeral procession and sculpture; throughout history, the story has been retold over and over, with the many writers and artists, using diverse mediums, portraying Burke and Wills as lost and bewildered men in an unfamiliar landscape.²⁵ Burke and Wills have *not* been remembered in the same way as other inland expeditioners,²⁶ such as Charles Sturt, Major Thomas Mitchell, Edward John Eyre, Dr Ludwig Leichhardt, Edmund Kennedy or John McDouall Stuart.²⁷ This may be because Burke did not follow the commonly accepted rules of colonial exploration.²⁸ However, it is remembered that Burke failed to listen to Aboriginal people’s advice;²⁹ therefore, he is remembered as either perishing in an arid and hostile environment³⁰ or failing to thrive in a flourishing landscape.³¹ Although part of a larger and forgotten scientific expedition,³² the *myth* of Burke and Wills alone and falling victim to the landscape,

¹⁷ Aaron Paterson, “Introduction: A Yandruwandhu Perspective,” in *The Aboriginal Story of Burke and Wills: Forgotten Narratives*, eds. Ian Clark and Fred Cahir (Carlton: CSIRO Publishing, 2013).

¹⁸ Tim Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills: From Melbourne to Myth* (Balmain: David Ell Publishing, 1991)

¹⁹ Recent focus has been on the idea that Burke and Wills died of “starvation in a land of plenty” – there are complex issues with this perspective, which is the topic of another paper. For works coming from this perspective, see Michael Cathcart, *Starvation in a Land of Plenty – Wills’ Diary of the Fateful Burke and Wills Expedition*. (Canberra: National Library of Australia Publishing, 2014).

²⁰ Dane Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 242.

²¹ Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces*, 242.

²² See this newspaper article for an overview of where this sculpture has been positioned throughout Melbourne. James Hancock, “Melbourne’s Burke and Wills Statue Removed from Display to make way for Metro Rail,” ABC News, April 10, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-10/burke-and-wills-statue-in-melbourne-relocated-for-metro-tunnel/8428766>.

²³ Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces*, 242.

²⁴ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*.

²⁵ Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills*; Deirdre Slattery, “Telling and Retelling National Narrative,” in *The Aboriginal Story: Forgotten Narratives*, eds. Ian Clark and Fred Cahir (Carlton: CSIRO Publishing, 2013).

²⁶ Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*.

²⁷ In Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*. See images 6 and 7 – only these explorers are included in the map identifying particular routes.

²⁸ That is, appropriating Indigenous knowledge. See Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*.

²⁹ Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills*, 311.

³⁰ Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills*. 302. The artworks of Sydney Nolan best represent the myth of Burke perishing in a desert.

³¹ Cathcart, *Starvation in a Land of Plenty*.

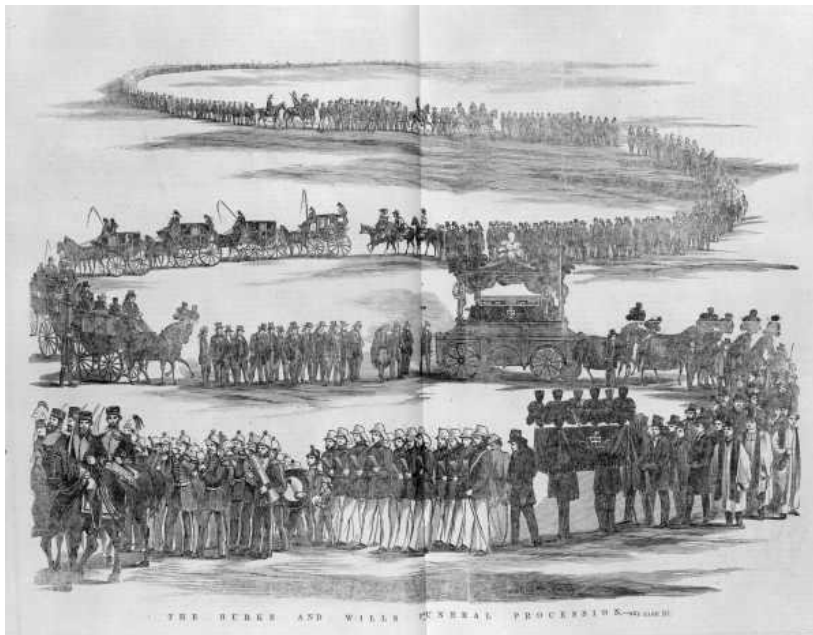
³² Bernie Joyce and Doug McCann, *Burke and Wills: The Scientific Legacy of the Victorian Exploring Expedition* (Melbourne, CSIRO 2011). For criticism of the organisers for neglecting the scientific aspect of the expedition and choosing to focus on the race with South Australia, see Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “The

supports an understanding of settlement and ways in which the land and resources were used within Australia. Mary Midgley explains:

We are accustomed to think of myths as the opposite of science. But in fact they are a central part of it: the part that decides its significance in our lives. So we very much need to understand them.

Myths are not lies. Nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape meaning.³³

Figure 1: Burke and Wills Funeral Procession



Source: Artist unknown, *Burke and Wills Funeral Procession*, wood-engraving, *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 24 January 1863, Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria, accessed April 2016, <http://burkeandwills.slv.vic.gov.au/archive/archives/burke-and-wills-funeral-procession>.

Tim Bonyhady states:

More than any other event in nineteenth-century Australia, the deaths of Burke and Wills at Cooper's Creek have come to represent both the unwillingness of Europeans to learn from the Aborigines [sic] and their more general inability to understand the land. The way in which colonists nonetheless set up Burke and Wills as heroes has been seen as part of a larger process – usually cast as distinctively Australian, occasionally recognized to be as much British – in which European Australians have allegedly deified failure. Without regard to the complexity of their story, Burke and Wills have been grouped with other 'anti-heroes', from convicts through Kelly to Gallipoli, to sustain the larger simplicity that Australians have only been able to make legends out of their defeats.³⁴

Burke and Wills Expedition and the Royal Society of Victoria," *Historical Studies* 10, no. 40 (1963). See Figure 4 for further explanation of this race between Victoria and South Australia.

³³ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³⁴ Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills*, 311.

The construction of Burke and Wills as anti-heroes is key here. Some of the cultural knowledge produced about Burke and Wills at the time of the deaths focussed on commemorating the men as successful heroes, as though the historical narrative was already decided. Burke was to be celebrated as a hero for simply traveling from south to north – for winning the race. Yet, as time went by, focus was then maintained on celebrating their failures, blaming them – or more specifically, Burke³⁵ – for their deaths. By mythologising Burke’s failure to listen to Aboriginal advice, it becomes possible to justify the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges in the name of survival. The narrative that has become popular lately is Burke and Wills “starved in a land of plenty”³⁶; the landscape was flourishing and abundant with resources, they just needed to learn how to use them.

Within this process of commemorating their failure was included the erasure of scientific knowledge production during the VEE;³⁷ therefore, the subsequent denial of Aboriginal people’s involvement.³⁸ The overall purpose of exploration throughout the world was to generate geographic knowledge.³⁹ Some explorers shared a genuine interest in understanding the world through scientific endeavour; however, much of 19th century exploration was about “political power trying to enlarge its empire by universal conquest.”⁴⁰ Part of this political power is reflected in the commissioning of various artworks, newspaper articles, media coverage and history writing, which draws only upon archival memory – that is, committed to maintaining focus of the empirical evidence. Further perpetuating this myth, which supports the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge, at the 2018 Garma Festival, Richard Flanagan urged us to learn from Burke and Wills’ failure to listen to Aboriginal advice. Significantly, it was implied it is time to learn about Indigenous knowledge of the land by suggesting they perished in a “land of plenty.”⁴¹ This idea of “land of plenty” is reminiscent of explorers’ journals reporting *plains of promise*, ripe for settlement and exploitation. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the risk of appropriating knowledge *from* Aboriginal people; it is critical consider ways to reimagine these myths beyond being just another form of settler colonialism. Therefore, a process of history writing that aims to understand the employment or involvement of Aboriginal people as guides⁴² and “Native

³⁵ Some of Burke’s diaries are missing so it is difficult to assess to what degree he listened to Aboriginal advice. Although there are a few instances recorded in the explorer’s diaries, it is recognised that leaders of exploration parties did not encounter Aboriginal peoples to the same degree as those members who stayed in the depot camps. See Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*. For this reason, it would be interesting to look more closely at the experiences of those who remained at the depot camps, this includes the camel handlers, workers and sepoy.

³⁶ Cathcart, *Starvation in a Land of Plenty*. Also, see Richard Flanagan, “The World is being Undone before us. If we do not Reimagine Australia, we will be Undone too,” *The Guardian*, August 5, 2018, accessed November 25, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/aug/05/the-world-is-being-undone-before-us-if-we-do-not-reimagine-australia-we-will-be-undone-too>.

³⁷ Joyce and McCann, *Burke and Wills*.

³⁸ Clark and Cahir, *The Aboriginal Story of Burke and Wills*.

³⁹ Felix Driver, “Hidden Histories Made Visible? Reflections on a Geographic Exhibition,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 3 (2013); Kennedy, *Last Blank Spaces*.

⁴⁰ Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, 6.

⁴¹ Flanagan, “The World is being Undone.”

⁴² Clark and Cahir, *The Aboriginal Story*.

Police Troopers”⁴³, and “Sepoys” as carers of camels or “workers” within this colonial expansion is an important topic worthy of further research, because it moves away from the settler colonial narrative that contributes to the denial of Indigenous sovereignty by considering the intersectional, interconnected and interdependent factors contributing to successful exploration.

Another mechanism working to deny Indigenous sovereignty is the seemingly continual focus on solo-hero narratives.⁴⁴ By identifying the mechanisms that operate to deny the involvement of Aboriginal peoples and sepoys, this article acknowledges over 40,000 years of Indigenous people’s extensive knowledge⁴⁵ and the Stories⁴⁶ deeply embedded within this continent. These explorers, Burke and Wills, were not alone; they were two members of a very large scientific exploration⁴⁷ party that was established by the Royal Society of Victoria in 1860 and funded by various newcomers or settlers⁴⁸ on this land, many of whom created great wealth for themselves through squatting.⁴⁹ Counter to popular cultural knowledge productions associated with *opening up the heart of this nation*, their successes – not only the explorers’, but also the scientists’ and squatters’ – and their failures were never solo-hero endeavours. The myths operate by maintaining the narrative focus on Burke and Wills,⁵⁰ rather than considering the whole VEE and *all* those involved.

Those responsible for telling the story of Burke and Wills followed a particular formula associated with land and knowledge appropriation, which is based on the archival record and

⁴³ Peta Jeffries, “William Landsborough’s Expedition of 1862 from Carpentaria to Victoria in search of Burke and Wills: Exploration with Native Police Troopers and Aboriginal Guides,” in *The Aboriginal Story: Forgotten Narratives*, ed. Ian Clark and Fred Cahir (Carlton: CSIRO Publishing, 2013).

⁴⁴ Martin Thomas, *Expedition into Empire: Exploratory Journeys and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2014); Kennedy, *Last Blank Spaces*.

⁴⁵ Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture* (Broome: Magabala Books, 2017).

⁴⁶ Stories when capitalised represents deep knowledge rather than narrative representations of information. See Karen Martin, “Please Knock Before You Enter: An Investigation of How Rainforest Aboriginal People Regulate Outsiders and the Implications for Western Research and Researchers” (PhD diss., James Cook University, 2006). Martin explains: for Aboriginal people, “knowledge occurs in knowing your Stories of relatedness (Ways of Knowing) and respecting these Stories (Ways of Being) and the ways this relatedness is then expressed (Ways of Doing)”. Martin, *Please Knock*, 63. Sourced from Deborah Henderson, “The Apology, the Aboriginal Dimensions of Australian History and a National History Curriculum: Beginning a New Chapter?,” *QHistory* December (2008), 10. This article does not tell these Stories, but acknowledges they exist.

⁴⁷ Joyce and McCann, *Burke and Wills*.

⁴⁸ The term ‘settler’ is considered offensive to some people due to the devastation caused by colonial frontier violence. This violence contributed to the major disruption of Indigenous life, culture, tradition, and knowledges in many parts of Australia. See Nicholas Clements, *The Black War: Fear, Sex, and Resistance in Tasmania* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2015).

⁴⁹ Edward Curr settled in Yorta Yorta country. From recollections, he explains how he was ‘entertained’ by local Aboriginal people through the form of yarning and corroborees – arguably, this is learning from Aboriginal people. See Edward Curr, *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria then called the Port Phillip District (From 1841 – 1851)* (Australia: George Robertson, 1883). Similarly, Alfred Howitt, during his career as an explorer and anthropologist, also denied his use of Aboriginal knowledge related to the land. See Leigh Boucher, “Alfred Howitt and the Erasure of Aboriginal History,” in *The Aboriginal Story of Burke and Wills: Forgotten Narratives*, ed. Ian Clark and Fred Cahir (Carlton: CSIRO Publishing, 2013).

⁵⁰ The latest publication is by Peter Fitzsimmons, *Burke and Wills: The Triumph and Tragedy of Australia’s Most Famous Explorers* (Sydney: Hachette, 2017).

the belief in empirical history writing; that is, the theme that these heroes *opened the heart of this nation* by identifying what was located in the “ghastly blank”⁵¹ within the unmapped (in a Western sense), centre of Australia. Scientific exploration and expeditions mapped regions by laying new meaning over an already existing and storied landscape,⁵² they gathered geographical information and in the process identified land suitable for stock and settlement.⁵³ The historians writing about these events draw upon what they consider empirical evidence, such as the explorers’ diaries and journals. With each new history written about Burke and Wills, they draw upon the same archival evidence, which, in this case, happens to be flawed.⁵⁴ By returning to the same archival records, historians are at risk of continuing to follow “[i]mperial history’s mythic lineage of heroes” with a strong-held belief in the “cause and effect narrative history” and then use this as a strategy “to give the impression that events unfold according to a logic of their own”.⁵⁵ These imperial histories have the effect of justifying colonial settlement; they are settler colonialism. This mythic lineage has been regularly followed by non-Indigenous peoples as a strategy to ease the strong sense of social and cultural dislocation, find a sense of belonging and justify appropriation of knowledge and resources while denying Indigenous sovereignty, therefore supporting the imperial project.

Following the imperial narrative history of *opening the heart of the nation* has a couple of meanings: one is, these explorers opened the country for exploration, settlement and exploitation of resources and knowledge; and second, the tragic deaths of Burke and Wills helped all Australians to feel particular emotions around their own sense of belonging and becoming *new* Australians.⁵⁶ This term ‘new Australians’ was used as a descriptor for migrants and refugees, in particular, during the time of the White Australia Policy. This is an outdated term because it suggests a “fixed category of the ‘Old’ to which the ‘New’ assimilate.” Both of these meanings have the same outcome; that is, the maintenance of non-Indigenous belonging by denying Aboriginal sovereignty through the production and reproduction of “White” subjectivity – the solo-hero myth. These narratives, especially when situated within the framing of the Australian inland as a ‘desert and uncultivated’, actively denied Aboriginal people’s presence, a process that is today recognised and known as *Terra*

⁵¹ Alan Moorehead, *Cooper’s Creek* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963). Probably the most well-known story of Burke and Wills, this book was republished many times. In the opening passages, Moorehead writes in the chapter titled “The Ghastly Blank”:

Here perhaps, more than anywhere, humanity had had a chance to make a fresh start. The land was absolutely untouched and unknown, and except for the blacks, the most retarded people on earth, there was no sign of any previous civilization whatever: not a scrap of pottery, not a Chinese coin, not even the vestige of a Portuguese fort. Nothing in this strange country seemed to bear the slightest resemblance to the outside world: it was so primitive, so lacking in greenness, so silent, so old.

This is a perfect example of erasing Aboriginal people from their country through narrative and myth creation.

⁵² Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*.

⁵³ Joyce and McCann, *Burke and Wills*.

⁵⁴ Gerard Hayes, “Paper Trails,” *La Trobe Journal* 58 (1996). This article explains how the archival records associated with Burke and Wills are missing and incomplete, making them unreliable.

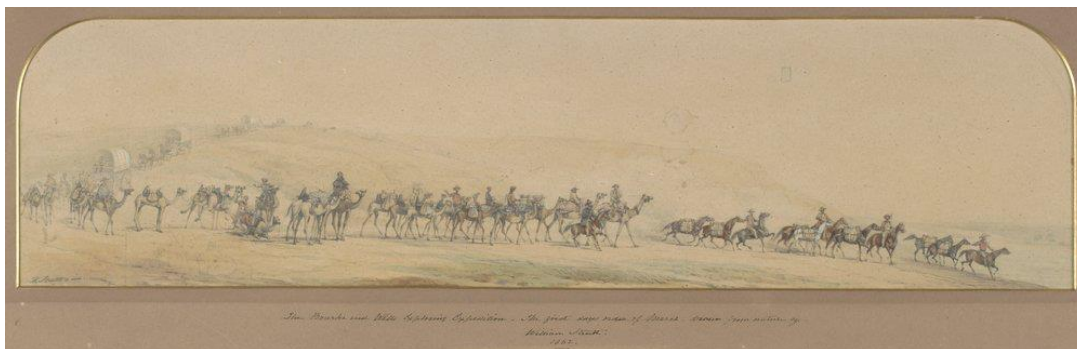
⁵⁵ Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*, xvii.

⁵⁶ Brian Galligan, Martine Boese and Melissa Phillips, *Becoming Australian: Migration, Settlement, Citizenship* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014), 2.

*Nullius*⁵⁷, and Indigenous rights to their land, knowledges and resources. The ‘land of plenty’ narrative promotes a race to the archives to discover traces of traditional ecological knowledge; however, this race might also lead to devastation without careful consultation.

As revealed in the section to follow, there are many who are denied, erased, not consulted or ignored within these myths of Burke and Wills. Imperial histories run the risk of sidelining the critical roles of Aboriginal people, the cameleers (or sepoy) and the camels, in opening the heart of the nation. The denial can be described using the cinematic term ‘space-off’, meaning that which “cannot be represented.”⁵⁸ This space-off creates a “dichotomised frame”⁵⁹ that supports binary thinking and the “Disneyfication”⁶⁰ of the Burke and Wills story. The process of space-off also makes the viewer believe there is nothing else in the scene. By focussing on the cause and effect approach to history writing, the historian can get caught up in solo-hero narrative or in imitating the subject.⁶¹ Therefore, noticing what exists outside of frame is critical to not only understanding these nation forming myths, but also for re-imagining new ones. The visual representations below (Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4) demonstrate the expedition as a whole and the process of space-off.⁶²

Figure 2: Start of the order of march for Burke’s exploring expedition



This image shows a long line of camels, horses, wagons and people riding camels and horses.

Source: Strutt, William, *The Burke and Wills Expedition: The First Day's Order of March*, pencil, watercolour and wash painting mounted on cardboard, 1862, State Library of Victoria, accession no: H5107.

⁵⁷ Similar to the sentiment and understanding generated by Alan Moorehead, Henry Reynolds addresses the implications of this type of narrative or storytelling, see Bain Attwood & Helen Doyle, *Possession: Batman's Treaty and the Matter of History* (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2009), 296.

⁵⁸ Pugliese, “Biotypologies of Terrorism,” 51. It is understood there are issues with representation and issues around who can speak for whom, which is why this article is structured this way, as a strategy to highlight the diverse voices to begin to reimagine these potentially rich colonial histories.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 27. In Pugliese, “Biotechnologies of Terrorism.”

⁶¹ Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*, xxii.

⁶² This idea or erasure emerges from earlier PhD research, a presentation I attended at the Islamic Museum in Melbourne Victoria, and a discussion with a colleague who suggested the term ‘space-off’.

Figure 3: Detail from Figure 2

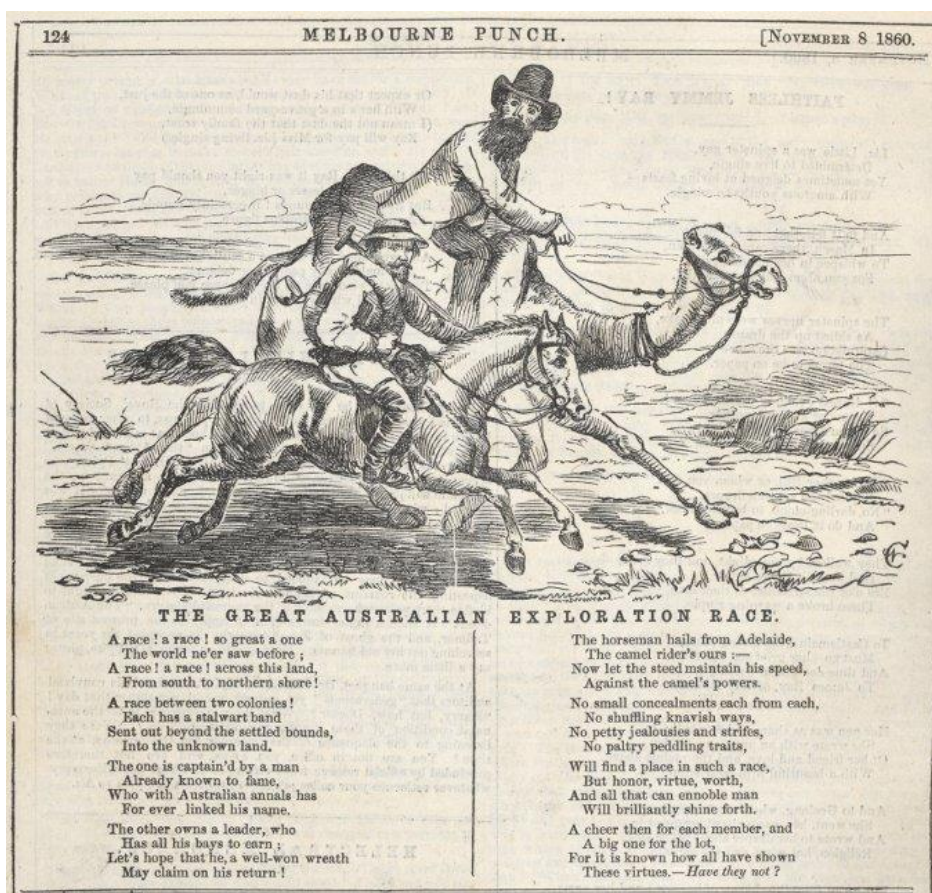
This detail shows how the focus is maintained on Burke (riding the horse) and Wills.

Figure 4 reveals the social and cultural focus being directed to the expedition leader(s) as the solo-hero. This is one example of many where the VEE has been memorialised as a solo-hero endeavour – the names Burke and Wills, through the entire process of space-off, became inseparable.⁶³ Further, in the *Melbourne Punch*, these explorations were clearly presented as a political competition or race between two colonies – where, it was broadly recognised, the use of camels placed Victoria in a position of power and privilege. It was acknowledged from the beginning that the camels were a critical part of exploration and settlement success; however, little focus was placed on the people who supported this.⁶⁴ It is the name – *Burke and Wills* – which came about from these kinds of cultural productions through the ongoing memorialisation and commemoration. Through the narrative strategy of referring to the expedition as simply ‘Burke and Wills,’ the remainder of the party were taken out of the picture and unrepresented. This action of space-off treats the landscape as a stage where historical actors perform their higher destiny, as though their role is already defined. Instead, it is possible to study the phenomena of an already storied and inhabited land where the historian has the potential to “focus on the intentional world of historical individuals, the world of active, spatial choices” to perform or reimagine stories beyond settler colonialism.⁶⁵ The implication of the focus remaining on Burke and Wills, as though they were the only people in the exploration party, is significant because it reinforces binary thinking by erasing the involvement of Aboriginal peoples and the broader expedition party. The myths created around Burke and Wills should be understood as shaping ongoing relationship between people and the land. The formal title of the expedition was the Victorian Exploring Expedition – using this title, at least, begins to represent all members.

⁶³ Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills*.

⁶⁴ This is in reference to the VEE, in particular, as there are recent histories that focus on the cameleers and Islam in Australia. See Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).

⁶⁵ Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*, xvi.

Figure 4: The Great Australian Exploration Race

Depicted here are two exploration party leaders, South Australian explorer John MacDouall Stuart and Victorian explorer Robert O'Hara Burke, who were racing to see who could reach the Gulf of Carpentaria first. This image is by Nicholas Chevalier, a very well-known Victorian artist who reflected the social and cultural understandings of colonial exploration at this time. This image was published in the *Melbourne Punch*, a very popular newspaper of the era, on 8 November 1860.

Source: Chevalier, Nicholas, *The Great Australian Exploration Race*, cartoon, 1860, *Melbourne Punch*, November 18, 1860, 124, <http://burkeandwills.slv.vic.gov.au/archive/archives/great-australian-exploration-race>.

THE VICTORIAN EXPLORING EXPEDITION AND SUBSEQUENT RELIEF EXPEDITIONS

The VEE of 1860-61 consisted of the main expedition, which was divided into three, plus six relief expeditions (1861-62), which were sent out from and in many directions to search for the explorers when it was realised they were missing.⁶⁶ Including the main VEE expedition and relief expeditions, over 41 humans were directly involved in positions considered to be official and noteworthy;⁶⁷ however, there are many others who are not recorded and acknowledged.⁶⁸ Of the 41 recorded members of the expedition party, eight

⁶⁶ Joyce and McCann, *Burke and Wills*.

⁶⁷ These are the numbers of people recorded by the Royal Society of Victoria and remembered in the publication Joyce and McCann, *Burke and Wills*.

⁶⁸ Close reading of the explorer's diaries and other archival sources reveal more details of those involved; however, inclusion of this detail is beyond the scope of this paper.

people died in 1861 from direct involvement in the exploration.⁶⁹ Further, 21 people were recorded as dying as a result of direct interaction with the expedition; devastatingly, at least 13 of those who died were killed by exploration members.⁷⁰ These 13 were Aboriginal people and this recorded number is not a complete total – there were others who were injured or killed as a result of interactions with the expedition and relief expeditions, and many Aboriginal people were displaced as a result of the process of settler colonialism. By only focussing on Burke and Wills, the memories of those who lost their lives, those who lost their connection to the country and those whose traditions were significantly disrupted are also erased through the process of space-off.

Therefore, by considering and *representing* all those involved it is possible to begin remembering, commemorating and memorialising a more accurate account of the past – a truth-telling for reconciliation. For example, the main exploration party included 23 horses, six wagons and 26 camels. Throughout the process of the expedition, including the planning phases in Victoria and South Australia, and walking the camels around 1000km from Lahore to Karachi, “at least 17 sepoy camel handlers” were employed.⁷¹ George Landells was employed to bring camels from India to Australia for the expedition. He was working in India before the exploration and was employed for this role due to his extensive experience in military horse trading in India and his knowledge of camels.⁷² The expedition was postponed because Landells was unable to leave the country and travel to Australia due to what is today known as the “Indian rebellion of 1857,” “Indian mutiny” or “Sepoy mutiny” in Australia, but in India and Pakistan is known the “First War of Indian Independence” or “War of Independence of 1857.”⁷³ Therefore, the significant involvement of ‘sepoys’ in the VEE is also worthy of further research, especially when considered in the context of Australia’s Indigenous–Islam connection.⁷⁴ These numbers reveal that the legacy of Burke and Wills was not achieved alone and the involvement of sepoys is significant, for in early 1860, to support the VEE, 18 camels and nine sepoy camel handlers travelled by boat from Karachi to Port Melbourne.

THE FIRST ARRIVAL OF CAMELS AND THEIR HANDLERS IN VICTORIA

The sepoys associated with the VEE, contrary to relative popular belief,⁷⁵ were not the first cameleers in Australia. The *Argus* newspaper, the major newspaper of colonial

⁶⁹ David Phoenix, “Burke and Wills Web: Digital Research Archive” <http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/index.php>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² David Phoenix, introduction to *Burke and Wills: The Scientific Legacy of the Victorian Exploring Expedition*, by Bernie Joyce and Doug McCann (Melbourne: CSIRO, 2011), xi.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within*; Peta Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming* (Australia: UNSW Press, 2010); Mojgan Khadem, *Serenades* (Paddington: PalaceFilms, 2005).

⁷⁵ Phillip Jones and Anna Kenny, *Australia’s Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland, 1860s-1930s* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2010), 39.

Melbourne, reported on 15 November 1859 the arrival of six camels on R.M.S. *Malta*, which sailed from Aden, Yemen.⁷⁶ Although the press at the time believed they were the camels purchased by Landells, they were actually “four males and two females imported from Yemen as a private speculation on behalf of ‘Parsee importers’ who hoped the Victorian Government would purchase them for the expedition.”⁷⁷ It is clear these importers had a vision for the use of camels in Australia and had gone to great effort to participate in this colonial expansion. Phoenix explains, ‘Parsee’ (Parsi’), although usually referred to the Zoroastrian communities of India and Iran, in this historical context means a person from Persia, i.e. a speaker of the Western Iranian Farsi language,⁷⁸ and their camels were referred to as ‘Egyptians.’⁷⁹ The *Argus*, on 15 November 1859 on page 5, reports the camels arrived “under the care of two Arabs” and, while no further information is documented here, it is claimed these two men “would have been the first Arab camel-handlers in Australia.”⁸⁰ Although the Royal Society of Victoria petitioned for these particular camels to be taken to the Zoological Gardens, presumably to be incorporated into the acclimatisation project, the Chief Secretary Nicholson declined and the camels were purchased by theatrical impresario George Selth Coppin.⁸¹ Sharing the vision for the use of camels in Australia, as reported on page 8 in the *Argus* on 14 November 1859, Coppin placed the ‘Egyptians’ “on display in his Cremorne Gardens Menagerie” at Richmond, where, during the Christmas break, up to 2,000 people a day paid a shilling to see “the ships of the desert.”⁸² Eventually, these popular camels were secured for the VEE; however, after spending this time performing for the crowds, these animals, when compared with those which arrived from India with Landells, revealed a loss of condition.⁸³ Perhaps this example reveals the importance of having people who are knowledgeable to care for camels. Already the camels had captured the imagination of Melbourne, and together with Landells camels, created great excitement in these colonial times.

The excitement is captured by William Strutt, whose artworks today act as form of memorialisation of all those involved in the expedition. As the painting *Start of Order of March of Burke’s Exploring Expedition* reveals, many were involved in the expedition. Strutt’s artistic skills portray the personalities and actions of these diverse people who otherwise might exist only as vague figures in written archives. The images in Strutt’s

⁷⁶ David Phoenix, “‘More like a Picnic Party’: Burke and Wills: An Analysis of the Victorian Exploring Expedition of 1860-1861 (PhD diss., James Cook University, 2017), 269, accessed November 25, 2018, <https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/50833/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 269.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 269. Phoenix elaborates, “In Iran and Afghanistan Farsi is now referred to as Dari, while in Tajikistan it is called Tajiki.”

⁷⁹ Ibid., 270.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. For biographical information on Coppin, see Sally O’Neill, “Coppin, George Selth (1819–1906),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Australia: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1969), accessed November 21, 2018, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/coppin-george-selth-3260/text4935>.

⁸² Phoenix, “More Like a Picnic Party,” 271.

⁸³ Ibid, 271. Phoenix states, as reported in the RSV archives, “The six Cremorne camels were purchased on 3 July 1860.” *Argus* January 18, 1860, 6; Royal Society of Victoria, ‘Minutes, 14 June 1860’, EC Minutes, ex1001-026, Box 2088B/1, MS 13071, State Library of Victoria, 49.

notebook and his photographs show individual people, carefully considered, witnessed, represented and memorialised. The Dixson Library of the State Library of New South Wales holds William Strutt's journals. Contained within these journals are images of the sepoy and camels. Represented in these images are, presumably, Dost Mahomet, Esau or Hassan Khan, Samla, and Belooch Khan.⁸⁴ These men were paid, initially, one shilling, which was increased at the request of Burke to two shillings per day; it was explained these men "were happy with this amount even though it was less than a third of what the other workers were paid."⁸⁵ Records reveal each of these men were employed to care for the camels.⁸⁶ Samla left the expedition because he could not eat the food supplied for religious reasons; Dost Mahomet and Belooch Khan were employed again for the relief expeditions to care for the camels; and Dost Mohomet eventually settled in Menindee, New South Wales, where it is remembered he prayed every day.⁸⁷ It is clear these men practiced their religion⁸⁸ in Australia, which could suggest the co-production or sharing of this knowledge between Indigenous peoples, early settlers and Islamic peoples through this expedition. Further research into these archival traces, using methods of oral history, would provide opportunity for reimagining the myths of Burke and Wills.

Recently, there has been increased research in the area of Indigenous–Asia histories, most well-known being the trade between Makassar and Aboriginal people in northern Australia.⁸⁹ Histories and stories have been written about Aboriginal–Chinese relations, in particular by Aboriginal authors Kim Scott⁹⁰ and Alexis Wright.⁹¹ A film has been produced about relations between German missionaries, Aboriginal people and the Muslim cameleers of inland Australia.⁹² It has been exclaimed that, without these stories, through the denial or silencing of these histories, people who are the descendants "feel robbed of two rich cultures and two languages."⁹³ These stories or micronarratives reveal cross-cultural encounters of "collective experience at once uniquely shaped by geography, culture and environment and at the same time representative" and these are local histories that "belong to the history of modernity at large."⁹⁴ It has been argued these examples of histories and stories have

⁸⁴ These men did not travel from Port Phillip to the Gulf of Carpentaria: however, their expertise was well-regarded by those on expedition. See William Strutt – a collection of drawings in watercolour, ink and pencil [...] illustrating the Burke and Wills exploring expedition crossing the continent of Australia from Cooper's Creek to Carpentaria Aug 1860-June 1861. 1st Series [and] 2nd Series, 1846-61. Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales. Call number: DL PXX3; DL PXX4, http://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=FL3253970&embedded=true&toolbar=false

⁸⁵ Royal Society of Victoria, Exploration Committee, Meeting, August 10, 1860, Minute Book, SLV, MS13071, Box 2075/1c, [no page number] (Image 54), <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/162914>, in Fitzsimons, *Burke and Wills*, 69.

⁸⁶ Joyce and McCann, *Burke and Wills*.

⁸⁷ This is recorded at his grave site just outside of the Menindee township.

⁸⁸ The ongoing practice of religion is acknowledged as a significant form of cross-cultural exchange and knowledge production, in Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming*.

⁸⁹ Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within*.

⁹⁰ Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart* (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 1999).

⁹¹ Alexis Wright, *Plains of Promise* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997).

⁹² Khadem, *Serenades*.

⁹³ Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within*.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 209-10.

supported the fact that Islam arrived in Australia prior to 1788 and maintained consistent cultural exchange throughout the country during this time.⁹⁵ Also significant is the use of camels for shipping stores and items of trade throughout the centre of Australia for many years.⁹⁶ These cameleers supplied many settler houses with furnishings and items to make these places home.

Arguably, the process of turning inland Australia into settler colonial spaces could not have been possible without the significant knowledge of the sepoy and cameleers and the camels. Further research into the level of involvement of these sepoy involved in the wellbeing of the camels would contribute to the creation of alternative narratives to shift focus away from the grand narrative of the solo-hero Burke and Wills. As a concerned “Indian Officer” wrote to the *Argus* newspaper in 1860:

... camels, they must [before] they commence their long and severe journey be in a healthy, strong state – not suffering from the effects of shipboard; that they must by degrees be seasoned to their work; and, above all, not bruised nor suffering from any bodily accident ... so sure as the attempt is made, so sure will it fail.⁹⁷

The officer also explained the importance of knowing how to care for the camels. The camels carried water and equipment, stores the expedition required to succeed. Without the camels, and the knowledge and skills of their handlers and carers, this expedition would not have succeeded in *opening the heart of the nation*. These micronarratives of the VEE contributed to the actual achievements, not Burke and Wills alone. These micronarratives, if carefully researched and told, counteract the effect of space-off.

CONCLUSION

The myth of Burke and Wills contributes to the erasure, the *space-off*, of significant historical figures, which is an issue because myths are a central part of how we understand the world around us; in this case, relationships between diverse people and the land. Perpetuating the myths of Burke and Wills as solo-heroes perishing in an arid empty land, or starving in the land of plenty, risks the ongoing creation of imperial histories that support settler colonialism and the ongoing denial of Indigenous sovereignty. Further, the *land of plenty* narrative replicates the *plains of promise* sentiment of the frontier, which further justifies the ongoing appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and resources. This article considers the idea that Burke was remembered as a failure to support the ongoing justification of settler colonialism. Historians, authors and artists have called for a reimagining of Australia’s myths for many years; however, little scholarly critical examination of the mechanisms promoting the Burke and Wills myth have occurred. This article begins to address this gap. Further, this article has highlighted areas for further research to support a reimagining of this myth, which is still so deeply embedded in the Australian psyche. In

⁹⁵ Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming*, 15.

⁹⁶ Jones and Kenny, *Australia’s Muslim Cameleers*.

⁹⁷ In Fitzsimons, *Burke and Wills*, 71.

particular, this article calls for further examination of oral and social histories from regions through which the VEE travelled, some of which have revealed evidence of Aboriginal and Islamic shared histories – more research is required in this area, beyond the archival memory.

The archival records at the State Library of New South Wales reveal detailed images of the Muslim cameleers and their camels involved in the VEE. Research into these visual works would be highly valued by those located in western and central NSW, who believe they are decedents of Islamic cameleers. However, empirical history research is insufficient because this is what the myth of Burke and Wills is built upon. By prioritising the same data that maintains non-Indigenous belonging and becoming through the denial of Indigenous sovereignty, the same story is told over and over again. Therefore, reimagining the national myth of Burke and Wills requires an approach that considers the interconnected and interdependent micronarratives that enable successful exploration.

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