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JOHN MCDOUALL STUART (1815-1866)

One of Australia's greatest explorers, John McDouall Stuart, was born on 7 September, 1815 at Dysart, Fifeshire, Scotland. He came to Australia at the age of twenty-three and worked as a draughtsman in the Survey Department of South Australia. He also tried his hand at sheep farming for a short period.

His interest in exploration commenced in 1844 when he was appointed to act as draughtsman to Charles Sturt's expedition north from Adelaide to Cooper Creek and the edge of the Simpson Desert.

This party was the first to penetrate almost to the centre of the Continent.

Stuart's first expedition in his own right was made in 1858 when he covered a distance of more than 1600 kilometres in three months.

He opened up much of the mining area of the North Flinders Ranges and, during the following year, in 1859, he completed two expeditions to Lake Eyre.

Stuart had established a reputation for exploration when, in 1859, the South Australian Government offered a reward of 2000 pounds for the first man to cross Australia from south to north.

John McDouall Stuart accepted the challenge and set out from Adelaide and thence Chambers Creek, in March 1860.

Proceeding northward he discovered a large sandstone formation which he named Chambers Pillar after which he crossed and named the MacDonnell Ranges after the Governor of South Australia, Brother His Excellency Sir Richard MacDonnell.

He then reached the geographic centre of mainland Australia, the first European to do so. The hill named Central Mount Stuart commemorates this achievement.

This, and a second subsequent attempt in November 1860, both failed to achieve the objective of reaching the northern coast.

On one occasion he was forced to return due to lack of provisions, on another because of hostile aborigines at Attack Creek.

Although the desert and its inhabitants were proving a formidable barrier, by sheer grit, determination and an uncanny expertise for survival, he and his men were able to return safely each time.

Undaunted, in October 1861, he tried again and, at his third attempt, he met with success.

He reached and named Daly Waters and then reached the north coast to the east of Darwin on 24 July 1862.

He planted a flag given to him by Miss Elizabeth Chambers and he named the place Chambers Bay.

Stuart wrote: "If this country is settled, it will be one of the finest colonies under the crown..... what a splendid country for producing cotton".

He returned to Adelaide in January 1863, on the same day that the ill-fated explorers Burke and Wills were being buried in Melbourne.

He was barely able to walk and almost blind after a journey of some 7000 kilometres through some of the most desolate country on earth.

He and his companions received a tumultuous welcome on their return to Adelaide. The party were given a reward of 3500 pounds of which Stuart received 2000 pounds and a grant of 1000 acres of rent-free land.

He was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Geographical Society.

Thirty-three years later, an interesting sidelight was a comment in "The Bulletin" published in Sydney on 12 January, 1895 which asked: "What became of McDouall Stuart's Eureka flag? He carried it from Adelaide and unfurled it at Carpentaria. It was made by a Miss Chambers". No reply was published.

He must have had a strong attachment to Elizabeth Chambers to use her name for three geographical features. Her father had financed some of his expeditions.

When compared with other explorers, his expeditions were inexpensive and lightly equipped which enabled him to travel at an incredible speed, all the time making highly accurate maps.

He did not use camels on any of his journeys.

Stuart reported that there was good grazing land to the north and, as a result, the South Australian Government accepted temporary control of their Northern Territory.

Of even greater importance to Australia was that his maps were used as the basis for the construction of the overland

telegraph line completed in 1872. The line followed very closely the route taken by Stuart and was supervised by Charles Todd, Superintendent of Telegraphs and Postmaster-General of South Australia.

A telegraph station was established in 1872 at a waterhole named Alice Springs after Charles Todd's wife.

By 1888 a small settlement had been established and on 28 November the township was named Stuart in honour of the explorer. In time the settlement grew in importance and, by popular demand, on 31 August, 1933, the official proclamation by the Governor-General, Very Worshipful Brother Sir Isaac Isaacs, was gazetted changing the name of the town from Stuart to the original Alice Springs.

There cannot have been too many occasions in history, when one brother mason removed another's name from the map at the stroke of a pen!

The explorer, described by historian Philip Geeves as 'The whisky-drinking Scot', has his name commemorated by the Stuart Highway and the Stuart Range.

On the Loftus Street facade of the Lands Department building in Sydney at the Bridge Street corner is a statue of John McDouall Stuart. It is one of 23 erected in niches set into the four external walls of the building and he is one of the few depicted who had no connection with New South Wales.

Such was the importance of his journey and the resultant overland telegraph to the whole of the nation.

An extract from his diary records an interesting encounter with aborigines:

"Tall, powerful, good-looking, as fine a specimen of the native as I have seen, their countenances quite different from the men of the south..... an old man, very talkative, but I could make nothing of him. I endeavoured by signs to get information as to the next water, but we could not understand each other. After some time and having conferred with his two sons, he turned round and surprised me by giving one of the masonic signs.

I looked at him steadily. He repeated it, and so did his two sons. I then returned it, which seemed to please him very much, the old man patting me on the shoulder and stroking down my beard. They then took their departure, making friendly signs. We enjoyed a good supper from the opossums which we had not had for many a day".

This quotation also appears on page 72 of her book 'The Territory' by Ernestine Hill.

The meeting with the Aborigines was also reported in 'The Freemason' published in Sydney May 17, 1880:

"Stuart, the Australian explorer, reports that he met with a tribe of Aborigines who gave the full signs only known to the brethren of the mystic tie".

It is worth noting that 'one of the masonic signs' described by Stuart in his diary, had been expanded by 'The Freemason' into 'the full signs'.

One is left to ponder the possibilities.

John McDouall Stuart was initiated into Freemasonry in The Lodge of Truth No.933 English Constitution in Adelaide on 1 August 1859. This lodge, subsequently re-numbered 649 English Constitution, became No.8 on the register of the Grand Lodge of South Australia in 1884.

He was passed to the second degree on 9 August 1859 and raised to the third degree seven days later on 16 August.

Special dispensation was granted by the Provincial Grand Master of the English Constitution for South Australia, Right Wor. Bro. Dr. Benjamin Archer Kent due to Stuart's imminent departure on one of his exploratory journeys.

Stuart resigned his membership on 31 March 1864.

His Master Mason's Certificate, which was issued on 15 April 1860, was located at Narring in South Australia in 1928 and is now framed and on display in the library of Freemason's Hall, North Terrace, Adelaide.

McDouall Stuart Lodge No. 219, South Australian Constitution meeting at Alice Springs is named after him.

Stuart returned to England in 1884 where he died in June 1886 at Notting Hill Square, London. Fewer than a dozen mourners accompanied his coffin to the Kensal Green Cemetery.

On 25 July 1962, Australia issued a 5 pence postage stamp to commemorate the centenary of Brother John McDouall Stuart's crossing of the continent. The portrait was based on a photograph taken about 1863 and made available by a relative Mrs Mona Stuart Webster. The stamp is printed by photogravure on unwatermarked paper and perforated 14 1/2 x 14 3/4. The designer was Walter Jardine; the colours are blue, red, red-brown and black and 38,409,000 were printed.

The centenary of the completion of the overland telegraph was commemorated with the issue of a 7 cent stamp on 22 August 1972. The designer was John Copeland and 20,006,400 were printed on unwatermarked paper perforated 13 1/4 x 13 1/2.

Although this stamp does not depict Brother John McDouall Stuart, it is certainly a reminder of his outstanding achievement and the resulting contribution to Australia.

