

THREE EXPERIENCES OF BURKE AND WILLS

In June 1859 the South Australian government offered a 2000 Pound reward for a successful north-south exploration of Australia. In today's money this was worth more than \$300,000. The Royal Society of Victoria accordingly set up an exploration committee to plan and raise funds for an expedition. The inexperienced duo of Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills were appointed to head the ill-fated adventure.

By early 1860 Australia was abuzz with the proposed expedition, including two local boys. The first was my great-grandfather Tom Chivers. He was then aged fifteen and fast gaining on his adult height of more than six feet. The second was his lifelong Aboriginal mate Lanky.

Lanky was three years older than Tom, and at eighteen years had already reached his full adult height of barely five feet. Perhaps his jockey-size had been an advantage, because Lanky had already proven himself to be a gifted horseman while employed as a stockman in the Wonga Park area.

Lanky's father, Murrum, had worked closely with Simon Wonga in setting up these job opportunities for Aboriginal people with local settlers. Together with Wonga, Murrum had taken a delegation of Elders to the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas in February 1859, seeking a grant of land at Acheron in the Upper Goulburn. Murrum's presence in that delegation was due to the fact that he was a Senior Elder of the Taungerong, the Goulburn River tribe.

That meeting was successful in gaining a promise of land at Acheron and the local Kulin quickly took it up. They were ultimately cheated out of the land by squatters, who were also Parliamentarians, but that is another story. The point here is that February 1859 was the last reference I have been able to find anywhere of Lanky's father, Murrum. By that time Murrum was aged 56, so given his age and the life expectancy of Aboriginal people at that time, I can only assume that Murrum had died by early 1860.

This assumption also fits in with a significant life choice made at that time by his son, the diminutive Lanky. About early 1860 Lanky decided to leave the Yarra area where he had grown up and go droving at Swan Hill. He soon gained work with a local pastoralist named Manton, so as was common practice he adopted his employer's surname. For ever after that he was known as 'Lanky Manton'.

The only problem was that another Aboriginal worker had also adopted the surname Manton and he had a son named Lanky, who was born in 1853. So there ended up being two people named Lanky Manton in Swan Hill at the same time, but who were twelve years apart in age. Their biographies subsequently became confused and it took a lot of sorting out, but that too is another story.

By the time August 1860 arrived everyone in Melbourne was in a fever of anticipation, with the Burke and Wills expedition due to leave Royal Park on the fourth. Young Tom Chivers was by then only one month away from his sixteenth birthday, so he decided to ride his horse into Melbourne and see for himself.

The nineteen-man expedition took twenty-three horses and twenty camels. They had twenty tonnes of food and equipment, loaded on six wagons. This included a cedar table with two chairs and a Chinese gong. The expedition finally set off at 4pm watched by about 15,000 people. One wagon broke down before they had even left Royal Park.

Unfortunately young Tom Chivers was not among the 15,000 spectators because he arrived too late. Tom went home disappointed and for ever after told the story against himself.

Having often heard this story when I was young, I decided to make up for it and attend the 150th year anniversary re-enactment that was to be held in August 2010. However when I rang up on the third to confirm the time for the next day, I was told that the re-enactment had already taken place the day before. I was quite peeved that I hadn't made up for Tom missing out in 1860, but then in some weird way it seemed to add a little more symmetry to our lives.

As it turned out though, Lanky was in Swan Hill when the expedition passed through there on 6th September 1860, so he often proudly related this fact to his children and grandchildren. When he returned to the Yarra Valley ten years later and resumed his friendship with Tom, he also no doubt told him.

From 1870 onward for the next twenty years, Lanky continued to show his considerable horse riding skills by taking wild rides on a chestnut horse to visit Tom. The Aborigines Protection Board tried in vain to identify just who was taking these unauthorised rides between Coranderrk and Templestowe.