

The J. C. Darke Expedition, 1844

A bronze plaque, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the departure of J. C. Darke and party from Port Lincoln, was unveiled in Flinders Court, Port Lincoln, by the Mayor (Mr. R. F. Poole) on August 29. Between 400 and 500 adults and children witnessed the ceremony.

At the instance of the Royal Geographical Society (S.A. branch) bronze plaques were unveiled at Adelaide and Port Lincoln during August to commemorate the first and second stages of the setting out of the Darke expedition to locate the good country in the vicinity of Mount Wedge that had been reported by two runaway sailors, and to ascertain what other good country could be available for settlers on Eyre Peninsula. On October 21 next, a third plaque will be unveiled at Waddikee Rocks to mark the site of the fatal attack made by natives on the leader.

John Charles Darke was born in Hereford, England, in 1805, and arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1824, in company with an uncle, John Helder Wedge. After spending some years in Tasmania, farming and surveying, he became associated with his elder brother, William Wedge Darke, and the uncle already mentioned, in the surveying of the site of the new settlement at Port Phillip, which became the city of Melbourne. He then responded to Governor Gawler's appeal for extra surveyors to develop the still newer colony of South Australia, and in 1838/9 was engaged in survey work in the River Sturt, O'Halloran Hill, Reedbeds and Islington districts in turn. Then followed a period of private survey work, including an engagement by the Hawker family at Bungaree. His subsequent selection as leader of the expedition to Eyre Peninsula met with general approval on account of his qualifications and his personality. His assistant was John Henry Theakstone (not related to the local family), and of the two laborers with them,

and of the two laborers with them, only one—John Howard—has ever been named. They left Adelaide quietly on August 12, 1844, and embarked for Port Lincoln, where they were received by a local committee, and their equipment, including a dray and bullocks, was completed.

Departure was taken on August 29, several local residents accompanying the party as far as Mount Wedge. Darke's journal reports the progress via Big Swamp, the Fountain, Lake Wangary, Lake Greenly (western side), Mount Greenly and Lake Talata to "Wedge Hill," after traversing what he described as "excellent sheep and cattle country." He then struck off in a N.N.E. direction via Cocata Hill toward the Gawler Ranges, and crossed what is now the railway line to reach Granite Mount (Mount Wudinna), where he spelled some days. The route then passed by Poldina Ponds, Mount Sturt, Mount Allalone and Paney, through disappointingly poor country. Kobymirrika, on October 14, was his furthest camp, from which he sighted the southern shores of Lake Gairdner. He retracted his steps to Wudinna and rested two days, and decided to deviate on his return journey to Lincoln, via Eyre's "Table Top Peakes" (Darke's Peak).

Several friendly contacts had been made with the natives, and at Waddikee Rocks, the second day (October 23) out, about 20 appeared at breakfast time and were warned against approaching too close. Later Darke strolled toward the scrub in an opposite direction, when he was attacked, and before Theakstone could get to him the leader was speared in three places. The natives dispersed at a shot and everything possible was done to relieve the injured man, but he died the next night and his body was interred another ten miles still farther on at the foot of the peak that bears his name, some 25 miles from the scene of the tragedy.

One theory for the hostile action of the natives is that there had been unwitting encroachment on ceremonial ground, but a native account, some years later, that there was a plot to kill the whole party and possess their

kill the whole party and possess their stores—particularly sugar—and that Theakstone's shot deflected the natives from completion of the plan, seems the more likely. Darke blamed himself for neglecting to carry his gun with him.

LOCATING DARKE'S GRAVE

Mr. L. R. Whyte, "Wangaraleednie," Cleve, writes:—

Referring to the centenary of the death of Explorer J. C. Darke, the following description of the discovery of the grave, and the circumstances which led to the same, may be of interest.

In 1909, His Excellency Sir Day Hort Bosanquet visited Eyre Peninsula, accompanied by Captains Neame and Wright (aide-de-camp), and Messrs. E. B. Jones and Schomburg. (Both

Capt. Neame and Wright, of the British Army, were killed in the retreat from Mons in 1914).

Mr. E. B. Jones, of the Survey Department, arranged the trip. He wrote my father (the late James T. Whyte) asking him to supply three four-in-hand buggy teams and two saddle horses.

The Vice-Regal conveyance was drawn by four upstanding bays, clipped and groomed for the occasion and driven by my father. The second team was driven by W. Kaden, and the third by Jim Condon, with the writer as "a smart boy to help erect tents, etc." The aide-de-camp travelled on horseback. One saddle horse was injured and left behind, so Capt. Wright for two days alternately rode on the baggage or ran behind, doing up to 10 miles without a rest. The route was from Cowell to Mount Wudinna and back to the then railway terminus at Cummins.

The second night of the trip was spent at Carrapie Hill. Passing Darke's Peak the following morning, His Excellency was very interested in how Explorer Darke had been wounded by natives at Cootra Rock, and buried near the Peak. His Excellency

... by natives at ... and buried near the Peak. His Excellency said he would see that something was done to locate and mark the grave.

The Survey Department later instructed Surveyor W. G. Evans, who was in the locality, to see what he could do. Mr. Evans came to my father, who, in turn, sought the assistance of Mr. George Stanley. Together they proceeded to a certain part of the Darke's Peak Range, where many years before Mr. Stanley had stood with a Mr. Hamp. Mr. Hamp had then said to Mr. Stanley, "Darke, the explorer, is buried on that little flat." On arriving at the spot, the searchers could clearly see the old dray tracks, probably made in wet weather, and a tall pine had a distinct lean, suggesting that it was a young tree when the dray had passed over it 65 years before.

My father's attention was drawn to two shea-oak stumps, standing east and west, in between which the ground appeared to have, at some time, been disturbed. He thereupon hailed his companions, and on re-opening the ground, found a human skeleton, which they believed to be the remains of the explorer. It is on that spot that a monument now stands, bearing the inscription : —
"Sacred to the memory of John Charles Darke, Surveyor, who was mortally wounded by the natives when exploring in this locality on October 23rd, 1844, and died on the following day. Erected by the South Australian Government, 1910."

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