



In 2019, one of the shortest routes from Castlemaine to Albury was up the Midland Highway to Shepparton, east across to Benalla on the A300, then up the Hume to Wodonga and Albury—a distance of 326 kilometres. It took me three quiet and restful hours in an air-conditioned and automatic SUV, through country towns and pleasant, undulating grazing country and vineyards, with rest stops along the way.

In the year 1861, 29-year-old Edward Cole and his partner George Burnell, 32, took considerably longer in their spring trap with one horse. There were few settlements, no sealed roads, no convenience stores or motels, and no rest stops with drinking water or toilets. They traversed rutted dirt tracks through flat dry country barely known to European settlers, camping where they could find the shelter of trees, or beside a stream. As well as their precious camera, tripod, hood and associated bottled chemicals, they carried basic pioneering supplies—flour, tea, salt, sugar, perhaps some jam as a treat, with a billy and maybe a flat piece of heavy-gauge iron to cook their damper over a camp fire—and forage for the horse and a spade to bury their waste. Precisely when they left Castlemaine is not clear, but they must have reached Albury around June 1861, in time to backtrack west to reach Echuca before the end of the year.

Albury was a settlement on the Murray, Australia's longest river. Hamilton Hume and William Hovell had been the first European explorers to discover the river, in 1824, when Hume named it after his father, Andrew Hamilton Hume, who came to Australia in charge of convicts in 1790 and was later to become a farmer at Appin, west of Wollongong. In 1830 Captain Charles Sturt renamed it after the British secretary of state for war and the colonies, Sir George Murray.

By 1861, Albury had grown from a likely cattle crossing into a sizeable town. It had stores and market gardens, several pubs, a flour mill, a primary school, a courthouse and a jail.



The spring trap used by Cole and Burnell on their photographic safari from Castlemaine to Echuca via Albury in 1861

Since 1855, it had been connected by paddle-steamer to towns stretching west as far as Goolwa in South Australia. The Union Bridge had just been constructed across the Murray to connect Albury to Wodonga on the Victorian side of the border. Something about the town and its environment must have strongly impressed Edward, because later in the century he became an enthusiastic advocate for its suitability as the nation's capital:

The site is the most beautiful in Australasia. Albury, the New South Wales town, and Wodonga, the Victorian town, with the river running between them, lie on a plain a few miles wide, surrounded by hills in the shape of an amphitheatre, forming, as it were, a little world of itself. The space between the present towns, with its fertile soil, its river and lagoons, could by the hand of man be made into a Federal park similar to, and as beautiful as, the famous botanic gardens of Kandy; whilst the higher, yet fertile, ground, with gently rising hills all around, would furnish thousands of beautiful sites for gardens and residences.¹

Edward was not alone. Other advocates of Albury included the member for Sydney in the New South Wales Legislature, Henry Parkes. A great boost was given to Albury's claim in

1876 when the governors of New South Wales and Victoria, Sir Hercules Robinson and Sir George Bowen, visited the town and symbolically walked together across the Union Bridge. In January 1891 locals formed a Federal Capital Association, and in 1899 a commission was granted to Alexander Oliver, president of the New South Wales Land Appeal Court, to investigate sites presented by different interest groups for the new capital city. Over the next five years he examined twenty-three possibilities and held inquiries at fourteen of them. Debate continued through Federation in 1901, with no decision among the dozen or so sites still in contention. Albury's chances suffered a blow in February 1902 when a delegation of senators from the new federal parliament in Melbourne visited the town. The weather, always trying at that time of year, was extremely hot and blustery, and senators were heard to remark that it was a 'nice position for a federal cemetery' and 'hot as a stokehole'.² (The final decision to build the national capital on pasture land at Yass-Canberra, encompassing Lake George, was taken in 1908. Little did those making the choice realise that Canberra could get as hot as Albury in summer.)

Did Edward and George's 1861 visit make a mark on Albury? Cole Turnley claimed they took scenic photographs along the riverbanks and pinned them on the side of their cart, resulting in several profitable commissions.³ But neither the Albury and District Historical Society nor the Murray Art Museum has records of their stay. Nor do photographs attributed to them exist in the well-stocked municipal archives.

The Riverina was now a vast grain, cattle and sheep run, and Echuca and Moama were the closest points on the Murray for its produce to be assembled and sent on to Melbourne—a much closer and more convenient maritime port than distant Sydney. Travel-stained and weary, Edward and George arrived from Albury in this rambunctious and alcohol-sodden settlement in December 1861. Its pubs, cafes, music halls and brothels held no attraction for the earnest young men, whose idea of a stimulating evening was to debate whether the Bible was literally true or not (Edward thought not) over a pot of tea. And the purpose of their arrival was not to explore Echuca, but to secure passage on a paddle-steamer and make their way westward towards Adelaide, where George would assess prospects for setting up a photography business before committing his family in Castlemaine to a permanent move back to Adelaide.

On seeking bookings at the riverfront, they were told that at the end of a long, dry spring the river was too low for ferries. They were urged to drive their trap on to Wentworth, a town 450 kilometres further west at the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers, where there was plenty of water and steamers could navigate all year round.

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ECHUCA

Echuca is 230 kilometres west of Albury by road through the northern Victorian wine country of Rutherglen, Yarrawonga, Numurkah and Nathalia. It takes three comfortable hours by car today, but it was ten days by horse and spring trap in the late spring and early summer of 1861, with sparse settlements for revictualling on the way.

Echuca and its New South Wales counterpart, Moama, sit astride the confluence of three rivers: the Campaspe flows into the Murray from the south, and the Goulburn flows into the Murray slightly to the south-east. The ancient Murray delineates the boundary between Victoria and New South Wales, the actual border being on the southern, Victorian bank. The region was home to thousands of generations of original settlers, a dignified and cautious people sympathetically and knowledgeably observed in 1841 by Edward Micklethwaite Curr in his *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, Then Called the Port Phillip District (from 1841 to 1851)*, first published by George Robertson in 1883 and later abridged and reprinted in 1965. Curr identified many sub-tribes in the area at the time, all part of two larger groups: the Wongatpan and Towroonban, collectively known as the Bangerang.⁴ They had intimate knowledge of the rivers that provided their sustenance, diving for fish and hunting for ducks in the waters beneath the magnificent river red gum forests, floating on bark canoes with fires kept burning on a hearth

of wet clay in the bows both to grill freshly caught fish and for warmth. Opossums, kangaroos, wombats and emus provided additional protein, while yams and native carrots were their vegetables. A mild climate and abundant food meant the Murray natives enjoyed a life of comparative ease.⁵

As happened throughout Australia, the lives of the original inhabitants were shattered by the coming of white people and their alcohol and alien diseases, and by the seizure of hunting grounds and the destruction of sacred and ceremonial places. As Curr observed:

There was, however, no doubt, a tendency to disease consequent on the partial abandonment of their traditional ways of life for others less healthy, for, after my settlement in their country, the Bangerang gave up in great measure their wholesome and exhilarating practices of hunting and fishing, and took to hanging about our huts in a miserable objectless frame of mind and underfed condition, begging and doing trifling services of any sort. To this course they were mainly led by their desire to obtain from the newcomers various commodities, such as iron tomahawks, tobacco, and especially flour, mutton, sugar and other articles of food for which they quickly acquired a keen relish, and preferred to the game, fish and roots on which they and their ancestors had subsisted.⁶

Passing through the area for a second time in 1838, the explorer Charles Sturt noted of the indigenous inhabitants:

Many were pitted as if by smallpox. The disease, which was raging among them on the Darling in 1828 and the Murray in 1829 must have committed dreadful havoc, since on this journey I did not see hundreds to the thousands I had formerly met. I could not contemplate without a feeling of melancholy the remnant of these unfortunate people. A new era was dawning, and a fearful change was coming upon them, whether for good or evil God only knows.⁷

Following repeated unequal clashes with pastoralists—muskets and swivel guns against spears—the Bangerang were forced out of the settlement of Echuca by the late 1850s to subsist as best they could on its fringes with little or no recognition. Meanwhile, overland droving of cattle destined for meat-hungry southern and western markets passed through Echuca in increasing numbers. Among the early drovers were Charles Bonney and Joseph Hawdon, the pioneers in 1838 of a safe stock route from the Riverina to Adelaide. They were closely followed by Sturt, who left Sydney on his second major expedition in April 1838 with 400 head of cattle.

Two entrepreneurs stand out as early developers of Echuca and Moama.

James Maiden was convicted at the Lancaster Assizes on 8 March 1834 of theft: he did 'feloniously and burglariously (sic) steal take and carry away' silverware from a private house—sugar tongs, teaspoons, castor tops and a mustard pot to the value of nine shillings—plus two candles, each worth a penny. King William IV 'was pleased to extend

His Royal Mercy' and commuted the sentence to seven years' transportation to New South Wales. Maiden sailed on the *Bengal Merchant*, arriving in Sydney on 30 January 1835.⁸ A compact, energetic man, he became a stockman after gaining his ticket of leave, and built a punt on Long Swamp Run on the Goulburn River. In 1845, he installed a larger punt on the Murray at Moama. With takings from ferrying cattle, he built a pub, the Junction Inn, which was licensed in July 1846 and became a changing station for a coach service between Deniliquin and Bendigo. He also acquired a postal service and several properties. The gold rush at Bendigo, Ballarat and Castlemaine dramatically increased the demand for meat, and on acquiring an abattoir, Maiden became the largest carcass butcher in the district. By 1855 he had bought seventeen properties and was widely regarded as a very wealthy man, the 'owner' of Moama. As a cattle market, Moama became known as the Chicago of Australia (Chicago being the notorious centre of the US meat trade at the time).

Across the border in Echuca, similar developments were taking place through the energy of Henry Hopwood. Born in Bolton, Lancashire in 1813, he was transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1834 for receiving a bolt of stolen silk. He was literate and charming, with much energy and a lively mind, and amassed a fortune by developing a monopoly of punts and bridges on all river crossings in and out of Echuca. In April 1853, Hopwood was granted a licence to occupy part of Wharparilla Run, known as Junction Paddock, lying east of the Murray-Campaspe Junction; today it is Echuca's Victoria Park. In 1858 he built the Bridge Hotel, described by Helen Coulson as the jewel in his crown.⁹ At the time of writing, the building still stands.

Instead, they embraced a radical change of plan. At the waterfront they exchanged their horse and trap for a boat owned by a local lounge: an ungainly, heavy, 18-foot (5.5-metre) craft made from planks of river red gum. They knocked up foot lockers on either side of the boat, a navigating table up front, and a canopy over the top, and transferred in their camera, tripod, bottles of chemicals, trays and boxed sheets of glass; the boat would double as a camp kitchen and darkroom. They augmented their remaining stores from the trap with salted beef, flour and vegetables bought locally. They faced a voyage of just under 1700 kilometres to the entrance to Lake Alexandrina, which they estimated would take them until around the middle of 1862, about six months. In fact, it took them four months.

Others had navigated parts of the Murray before them. The most extensive exploration had been conducted by Sturt, who in 1830 had solved the mystery of where the west-flowing Murray-Darling river system ended up. Did it go into a vast inland lake, or end up in the sea? Using a whaleboat with convict oarsmen, he travelled all the way to Lake Alexandrina in South Australia and was disappointed to find not a navigable outlet to the Southern Ocean but a vast freshwater lagoon, which was separated from the Southern Ocean by sand-bars. He and his party then faced the unenviable task of rowing back up the river in summer heat against the current. They made it as far as Narrandera before abandoning the river and heading overland back to Sydney.

In 1849 Daniel Bunce, an English-born botanist and nurseryman, travelled down the Murray Valley from north of Melbourne to Adelaide, and in 1853 Baron Sir Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich von Mueller, an eminent pharmacist and botanist, collected seeds and other specimens from the river country around Mildura for the herbarium and botanical gardens he was establishing in Melbourne. Edward Cole later sent von Mueller seeds of plants he had collected along the Murray, some of which the latter planted when he was director of Melbourne's Botanic Gardens, a position he held until 1873 when he was replaced by the horticulturalist William Robert Guilfoyle.

In 1857, the naturalists William Blandowski and Gerard Krefft led an expedition financed by the Victorian colonial government to explore the river system and its flora around Mildura. They established a semi-permanent camp below the cliffs of present-day Merbein, and assisted by Yaree Aboriginal residents at the Yelta Mission Station, collected many botanical and zoological specimens. Both were competent artists, and they produced watercolours and sketches of Aboriginal people, fauna and environs around Merbein. Another botanist, John Dallachy, curator of Melbourne's Botanic Gardens from 1849 to 1857 (preceding Mueller's appointment as director in 1857), undertook an expedition between Wentworth and Mount Murchison on the Darling River in 1858, resulting in a wealth of botanical specimens.¹⁰

Less scientifically minded adventurers had spilled out from abandoned diggings on the goldfields of Ballarat, Bendigo and Castlemaine and rowed along parts of the Murray. But none of these had undertaken a photographic survey as Edward and George were contemplating. Blandowski and Krefft had been equipped with photographic equipment, but its technical demands had defeated them and they did not use it, relying instead on their paint-brushes and skills as artists.

Edward and George departed Echuca on New Year's Day, 1862. Waved off by locals from the wharf, they faced the river without even a shakedown cruise. They had a pair of oars for propulsion and a long pole to fend things off, but neither of them could handle these with any confidence: they either dipped their oars too deeply or feathered them, catching air and falling flat on their backs. They nearly turned the boat over when they changed positions, and got caught in snags, which proliferated in the river, or drifted aimlessly from one bank to the other. After a few days of travail, it occurred to them to go with the flow, to drift with the current, simply keeping the boat in the centre of the stream by using one oar as a rudder. At Edward's insistence (opposed by the dour and unimaginative George), they even rigged up a sail at one stage, which added to their speed—although Edward almost capsized the boat when turning too quickly around a river bend, the wind suddenly coming from the opposite direction. It did not occur to them to fit a centreboard, so tacking across the stream was not possible.

Many stations and settlements existed along the Murray by 1862, and the Murray–Darling Basin Commission in Canberra lists fifteen of the more prominent.¹¹ Edward and George called in at many of them to get information about local conditions and advice about Aboriginal communities, and to collect botanical specimens. In his diary of the voyage, Edward made special mention of what he took to be wild cherry bushes, box plants and blackwood trees along the banks and the spectacular sandbanks they passed, some rising 12–15 metres above the river. The pair were generally welcomed and treated with hospitality by station owners and their families: their bizarre and sudden arrival, especially their photographic gear, broke the silent tedium of bush life along the river.

It took them till March 1862 to reach Wentworth, the regular paddle-steamer terminal from South Australia at the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers. Suddenly the river was a lot wider, with a larger volume of water and more currents and eddies. Wentworth was the one place at which, according to Turnley, they offered their photographic services without success. It was said to be a notoriously puritanical Calvinist settlement where photography was regarded as catering to men's vanity and a sin.¹² This perception offended their professional sensibilities, although as a fervent biblical literalist, George was not put out too much. Nor, to Edward's chagrin, did George have any difficulty refusing a succulent lamb roast at another settlement because the wood for the oven had been chopped on the Sabbath.

The Cole-Burnell rowing boat on a vast and
lonely stretch of the Murray—it was hot,
heavy and ungainly

