Land of the

Lost

by David Gough and Bruce Macdonald

In 1896, the Great Sandy Desert was virtually unknown to Australians of European descent. But by the end of that year, two search parties, one led by William Rudall and the other by Larry Wells, were scouring an area centred on the Rudall River for signs of two missing explorers. One hundred years later, the Great Sandy Desert is still an incredibly remote, vast, arid and unforgiving land.

In 1896, Albert Calvert, a London-based gold-mining engineer with interests in Western Australia, sponsored an expedition to fill in the unexplored blanks on the map and, with luck, find some likely gold-bearing country into the bargain. The South Australian branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia was asked to organise the expedition, known as the Calvert Scientific Exploring Expedition.

South Australian surveyor Lawrence (Larry) Wells, then 36 years old, was appointed leader. Larry's older cousin, Charles Wells, 47 and also a surveyor, was second in command. The expedition's naturalist was amateur ornithologist George Kearteland of Melbourne. George Jones, 18, was mineralogist and photographer, James Trainor was camp cook, while the Afghan Bejah Dervish was in charge of the camels.

The party sailed from Adelaide for Geraldton in May 1896, then took a train to Mullewa. Here, Larry Wells purchased 20 camels and hired another Afghan, Said Ameer, as assistant camel-driver. Setting out from Lake Way near the present-day site of Wiluna on 13 June, the seven adventurers headed north-east into the great unknown.

Previous page
Main: Spinifex-covered sand dunes and plains of the western deserts.
Photo – Jiri Lochman
Inset top: Contempory portrait of Lawrence Allen Wells. [B1079]
Inset Above: Calvert Expedition members, 1896. Left to right – Alex Magarey, (Calvert's agent in Adelaide), Larry Wells, George Jones, Charles Wells, George Kearteland. [B1081]
Photos – State Library of South Australia

Left: Relics, abandoned in the desert at Adverse well, were rediscovered 100 years later.
Photo – Bruce Macdonald

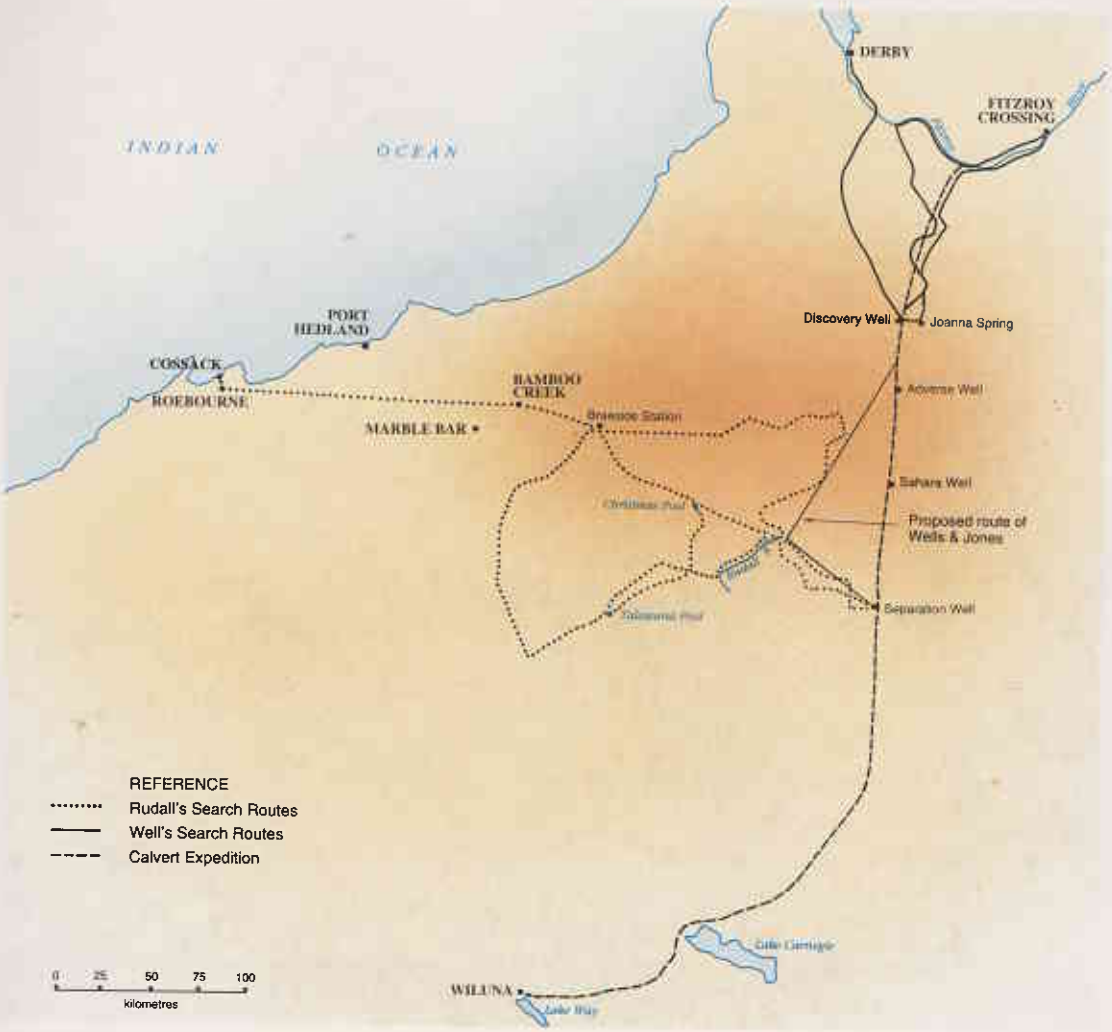
After four months of mapping and exploring they reached the Great Sandy Desert. The first European to discover the desert was Augustus Gregory in 1856, and the first east–west crossing was made by Peter Egerton Warburton in 1873. On 3 October 1896, the party camped at a small permanent waterhole south-east of Lake George. It was at this point, a few days later, that Larry Wells made the fatal decision to split the party into two groups. He made the following entry in his journal:

> My cousin [Charles Wells] and Mr Jones, will leave us, here, for a trip to the North-West, and we hope to meet eventually, somewhere in the vicinity of Joanna Spring.

THE SEPARATION

The two parties left Separation Well on Sunday 11 October 1896. Charles Wells and George Jones set off on a bearing of 290 degrees to survey lands for 90 miles (144 km) north-west, before turning north-north-east to rejoin the main party at Warburton's Joanna Spring.

Larry Wells's party headed to Joanna Spring, 185 miles away, on a direct bearing of 356 degrees, but soon got into difficulties. Intense heat, lack of fodder for the camels and inadequate water supplies took their toll. The heavily laden camels faltered on the high dune crests, and two died of thirst. The searing heat forced them to travel at night. In desperation, Wells dumped most of his equipment at Adverse Well, to make a dash to



the Fitzroy River. The party struggled northwards, and on 29 October 1896 arrived in the vicinity of Joanna Spring. Larry almost perished in the heat searching for the spring and the other party, with no sign of either. Rather than wasting more time, Larry's party left for the Fitzroy River with the little water they had. They reached the river on 6 November, without a drop of water left. With no sign of the other party, Larry noted in his journal:

> My only anxiety now is for my cousin Charles and Mr Jones.

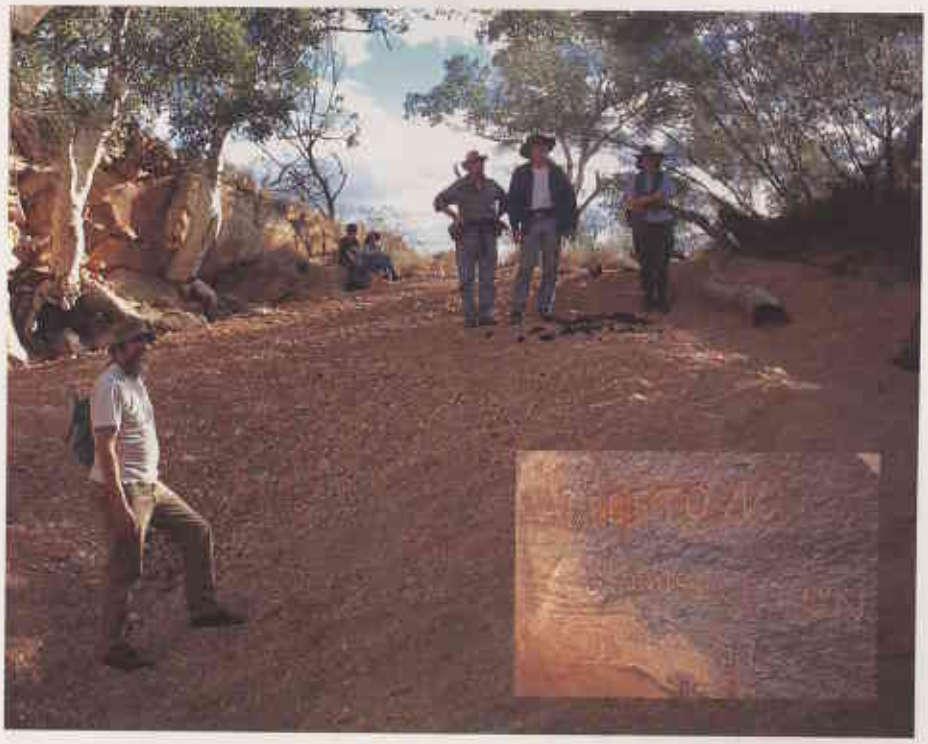
THE SEARCH BEGINS

A flurry of telegrams exchanged via Aboriginal runners to the Fitzroy Crossing Telegraph Station alerted the outside world to the tragedy. With barely enough time to recover, Larry Wells, with the two Afghans and six of the best camels, left Quanbun Station on 15 November 1896 to retrace his steps. They travelled no more than 30 miles south of the Fitzroy River before the camels became too weak to tackle the sand ridges. Wells made a further attempt, the first official Search Expedition, on 24 November with Police Trooper Pilmer, four horses and an Aboriginal tracker. They only made 40 miles before the horses knocked up in the desert and retreated on 27 November.

The second Search Expedition left Gogo Station on 6 December, this time with renowned bushman Nathaniel Buchanan. Larry Wells, Bejah, Buchanan and a tracker travelled into the desert with eight fresh camels. On Christmas Eve, two camels died from eating poison bush at a soak Larry called 'Disaster Water'. By 27 December, they were 90 miles from the Fitzroy River and down to the last three gallons of water. They were again forced to retreat, having found no trace of the lost explorers.

RUDALL

A few weeks earlier, surveyor William Rudall left Cossack, a pearling settlement on the Pilbara coast, and sailed to Fremantle after surveying the lands between Cue and Roebourne. Rudall took over from surveyor Newman, who fell ill at Peak Hill and later died of typhoid. Rudall arrived at Fremantle on 18 November. He was told that two men were missing in the desert country to the north, and was asked to put together a search party. Within a few hours, Rudall and Hubert Trotman were on the SS *Albany* heading back to Cossack.



Top: The Paterson Range, beneath which Rudall found 'a fine pool of water'. He later named it Christmas Pool.

Above
Main: Although dry when visited in 1996, it is easy to imagine the pool filled with cool clear water.
Inset: On 15 April 1897, Crofton and Connoughton left their marks here during the third search for the lost men.
Photos – David Gough

They arrived at Cossack on Sunday 29 November. The next day they picked up the camels and stores and, together with Mr A Crofton and an Aborigine called Cherry, left for Braeside Station, their base camp. They arrived on 16 December, and left on 19 December. Rudall's instructions were to go to a place 90 miles north-west of Separation Well and try to find Jones and Wells's tracks.

Crofton stayed at Braeside with the spare camels, while Rudall set off with Trotman, Cherry and George, another Aborigine. It was so hot that the heat burnt through the soles of their boots, so much of the first day was spent in the shade. Over the next few days they travelled in the early morning and late afternoon, resting during the day. On Christmas Day they arrived at 'a fine pool of water at the foot of a small waterfall in a sandstone range'. It was a godsend, as their water was already running low. Rudall named the place Christmas Pool.

The next few days were equally torturous: temperatures were higher than 124° Fahrenheit (51°C)—the

maximum reading on Rudall's thermometer. By 29 December, the party were about 80 miles from Separation Well. There was no sign of any tracks. A group of Aborigines told George that the missing men had gone west, so Rudall set off towards the Oakover River.

They arrived back at Christmas Pool on 7 January and camped for a day. Cherry found a cave—later named Trotman's Cave—about a mile away with drawings of kangaroos, turtles, lizards and figures in black, grey, yellow and red.

Rudall's party arrived at Tooncoonaragee Pool on the Oakover River on 13 January. For the next couple of months, they followed several fruitless trails along creeks to the south-east and south-west, venturing as far west as Ethel Creek Station, after reports of two bodies being 'found by natives' near there. The badly decomposed bodies turned out to have been those of two Aborigines.

Rudall's party arrived back at Braeside on 31 March. They rested the camels, bought another two months' supply of stores at Nullagine and sent telegrams to Perth detailing their search. Trotman became ill, so Rudall, Crofton, Cherry and Connaughton, who had been sent by the South Australian Government and who had met Rudall near the Oakover, spent the next three months in the desert searching along the proposed route of Jones and Wells.

WELLS SETS OFF AGAIN

The departure of Larry Wells's third search expedition from Fitzroy Crossing was delayed awaiting news of Rudall's search of the area around the Oakover River. After the telegrams were sent from Nullagine, Wells's party set off on 19 March 1897. They passed Disaster Water on 6 April and on 9 April local Aborigines guided them to the elusive Joanna Spring. Larry took a fixing and found it to be 15 miles east of the position marked on Warburton's map. It was not surprising they had all missed it.

An Aborigine was seen wearing a strip of tweed like the clothes worn by Charles Wells. On questioning, he indicated there were two dead whitefellows who had been 'killed by the sun'. Unfortunately, the Aborigines bolted during the night. Larry headed east hoping to find tracks that led to the dead men and, on 13 April, the party encountered another group of Aborigines. Here at 'Discovery Well' items of equipment belonging to the lost men were found, but the Aborigines were reluctant to tell them anything. Larry returned to the Fitzroy River, convinced there had been foul play.

THE LOST ARE FOUND

Wells formed another Search Expedition. He and Bejah left Derby on 14 May 1897 with Sub-Inspector Craven Ord, a trooper, an Aborigine, two trackers, 10 camels and four horses. On

Above left: A watercolour from a contemporary photograph of Rudall setting out from the Oakover River.
Photo – Bruce Macdonald courtesy of Barbara Rennie

Above: Camels were used extensively by early explorers. Now, they cause considerable damage in desert regions.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left: The sandhills of the Great Sandy Desert are as difficult to cross today as they were 100 years ago.
Photo – Bruce Macdonald

24 May, exactly a year after Wells left Adelaide, they arrived at Joanna Spring. Two Aborigines were run down with the horses and 'induced' to take the party to the dead bodies, which were six miles north-east of Discovery Well and within Z/v mile of Larry and Keartland's track on their third search. Wells wrote in his journal on 27 May 1897:

> I could then see my cousin's iron-grey beard and we were at last at the scene of their terrible death, with its horrible surroundings.

The body of Jones was found nearby, with his diary and last letter. The two had encountered salt lakes and difficult country. Becoming ill and despairing of accomplishing the trip to Joanna Spring, they retraced their steps to Separation Well. From there, they struggled north following the tracks of the main party to about 16 miles south-west of Joanna Spring. They became exhausted, lost their two remaining camels (one was abandoned previously) and perished on or about 21 November 1896. As the Aborigines were not implicated in the deaths they were released and given presents by Wells. The mummified bodies were sewn in sheets and taken to Derby, where they were shipped to Adelaide and given a State Funeral on 18 July 1897.

After searching for three months, Rudall's party finally made it back to the Oakover River on 17 June 1897. When only about 60 miles from Joanna Spring, their camels had died. Fortunately, local Aborigines guided them from soak to soak back to the Oakover, or they too might have perished. On arriving back at Braeside they heard that the bodies of Jones and Wells had been found. Rudall estimated that if his camels had not been poisoned, his party would probably have met up with Larry Wells close to the place where the bodies were found.

100 YEARS LATER

Members of the Calvert Expedition and Rudall's search parties suffered appalling hardships in the desert. There was little surface water and the sand hills were difficult to cross in the summer heat. Little has changed today. To mark the centenary of the original expedition, Bruce Macdonald joined Dave Morton and Rod Cramer, from Alice Springs, to retrace the route of the Calvert Expedition in two four-wheel-drives. Their aim was to accurately follow the main route and identify significant sites associated with the expedition and the searches by Wells.

The sand ridges were just as daunting as in Wells's day. It took the party 40 minutes to get both vehicles over one particularly high dune. On their worst day they encountered 78 ridges. And there were other problems associated with modern travelling. While the flowering grevillea and wattle scrub were picturesque after good rains, there were up to five punctured tyres a day in the worst of the scrub. But, unlike Wells, these modern day explorers had the advantage of being able to deviate temporarily from the course to retrieve fuel or water that had been cached on earlier planning expeditions.

They also made detours to several Aboriginal waters used by Wells during the search expeditions. All were now dry and silted up. Dillawuddi Rockhole was rediscovered for the first time on the trip, but the position of many others like Yerniakka Rockhole, Welcome Water and Tallingurr Rockhole, had already been

Above right: The beautiful Carrawine Gorge on the Oakover River.
Photo – David Gough

Right: Flame grevillea (*G. eriostachya*) literally drips nectar, and is a favourite food source of desert Aborigines.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above: G. pyriformis subsp. *keartlandii*, named after George Keartland, was the only new plant discovered by the Calvert Expedition.
Photo – Bruce Macdonald

Left: Bushcraft expert Bob Cooper described some of the edible plants to members of the 1996 expedition.
Photo – David Gough

found again by Rod and Dave on preparatory expeditions. In fact, it was Wells's preoccupation with finding water that helped the centenary party identify the various native waters so accurately. His descriptions were spot on. Many Aboriginal artefacts were also found in the sand hills around these soaks—grinding stones, desert walnut-crackers, fireplaces and bone middens. These items, together with Wells's descriptions, helped confirm the location of the sites.

Finally, the party visited the death site. The scene surrounding the tragedy had a rare beauty. This hostile desert is surprisingly well vegetated. In addition to the clumps of spinifex that impeded the progress of both the original expedition and the retracing party, desert gums, ironwood and smaller flowering plants were scattered along the dune crests. The valleys contained masses of flowering grevilleas and wattles sprinkled with stands of desert walnut.

IN RUDALL'S FOOTSTEPS

A few weeks later, *LANDSCOPE* Editor David Gough and WA bushcraft and outback survival expert Bob Cooper, set off with a small party of interested people to the Oakover and Rudall River areas in an attempt to identify some of the places visited by Rudall's search parties.

From Nullagine, the party headed east to the Oakover River. Tooncoonaragee Pool was identified along with the now well visited Carrawine Gorge. Here, flocks of white corellas screech up and down the three kilometres of permanent water, protected on one side by a huge cliff. Farther east is Christmas Pool, where Connaughton and Crofton's names are cut into the rock beside the pool. There was no water at the site, but the well-worn rocks above the pool showed evidence of seasonal rushing waters. In an adjacent gorge is Trotman's Cave. This is an important Aboriginal site with many fascinating paintings; some relatively recent, and others more than 10 000 years old.

The party followed Rudall's route south past Mt Isdell and Coolbro Creek to Yandagooge Creek, where they searched for a tree marked R4. The tree had long since been swept away by rushing waters of a winter-flooded creek. Few of the trees now standing were more than 100 years old, and the tree Rudall chose would have been large and prominent. Similarly, where the road crosses the Rudall River, there was no sign of the tree branded R5.

Heading east towards Meeting Gorge, where Rudall met explorer Frank Hann, the party encountered deeply cut creek beds that slowed progress to about 10 kilometres an hour. The track disappeared at Watrara Pool and it took some time to it find again. Because of the uncertainty of the track out from this remote area, and the fact that time was limited, the party retraced its route to the Oakover River and Nullagine, determined to return again next year.

This part of Western Australia is as difficult to traverse with modern vehicles as it was with horses and camels 100 years earlier. Even with the aid of maps and satellite positioning systems (GPS), it is still an unforgiving land. In the past ten years, 13 people are known to have died out there. Some were familiar with desert travel but, although well prepared, had still perished. Others had set off with little survival knowledge or preparation. They had no chance. The Great Sandy Desert is a vast and beautiful place, but the land of the lost is not a place for the faint-hearted . . . or the foolhardy.

David Gough is a communications officer in the Department of Conservation and Land Management's Corporate Relations Division, and is Editor of *LANDSCOPE* magazine. In his spare time, he is compiling, transcribing and editing the writings of William Frederick Rudall. David is indebted to Mrs Barbara Rennie—great niece of Rudall—for her help and support. He can be contacted on (09) 389 8644 (e-mail: davidg@calm.wa.gov.au).

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CALM provides a series of bushcraft and outback survival courses led by Bob Cooper. Details can be obtained from CALM by telephoning (09) 334 0481.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME TWELVE NUMBER 2, SUMMER 1996–97

Shannon National Park is the home of the Great Forest Trees Drive, another nature-based tourist attraction for the south-west. Read the story on page 17.

The rugged Kimberley coast was the location of the first maritime LANDSCOPE *Expedition. Read all about it on page 10.*

A huge volunteer effort has helped with the renewal of the Montebello Islands and the eradication of feral animals. (See page 47.)

Science has long-known the relationship between plants and habitats. Now we are 'Prospecting for Plants' using landforms as a guide. (See page 23.)

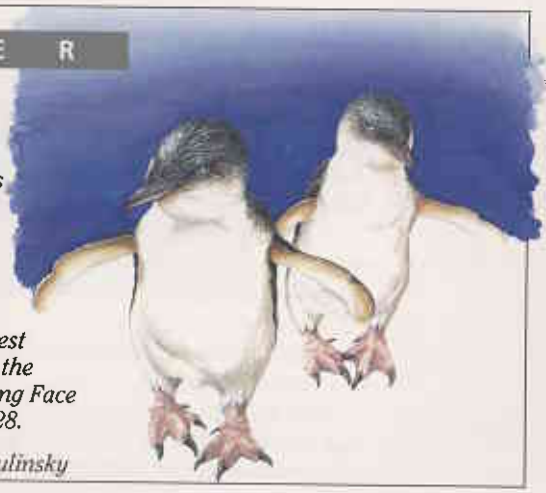
One hundred years ago, two members of an expedition to the Great Sandy Desert became lost. Read what happened to them in 'Land of the Lost' on page 36.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

*The scientific name of the little penguin (*Eudyptula minor*) means 'little diver'. The wings of these flightless seabirds have evolved into flippers for underwater propulsion. The little penguin is the smallest of the 17 penguin species. Penguin Island has the largest colony of little penguins on the west coast. See 'The Changing Face of Penguin Island' on page 28.*



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Finished art: Gooitzen van der Meer, Maria Duthie, Tiffany Aberin
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Subscription enquiries: ☎ (09) 334 0481
Colour Separation by Prepress Services
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

Visit *LANDSCOPE* Online on our award-winning Internet site *NatureBase* at http://www.calm.wa.gov.au/
Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director
Department of Conservation and Land Management,
50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia