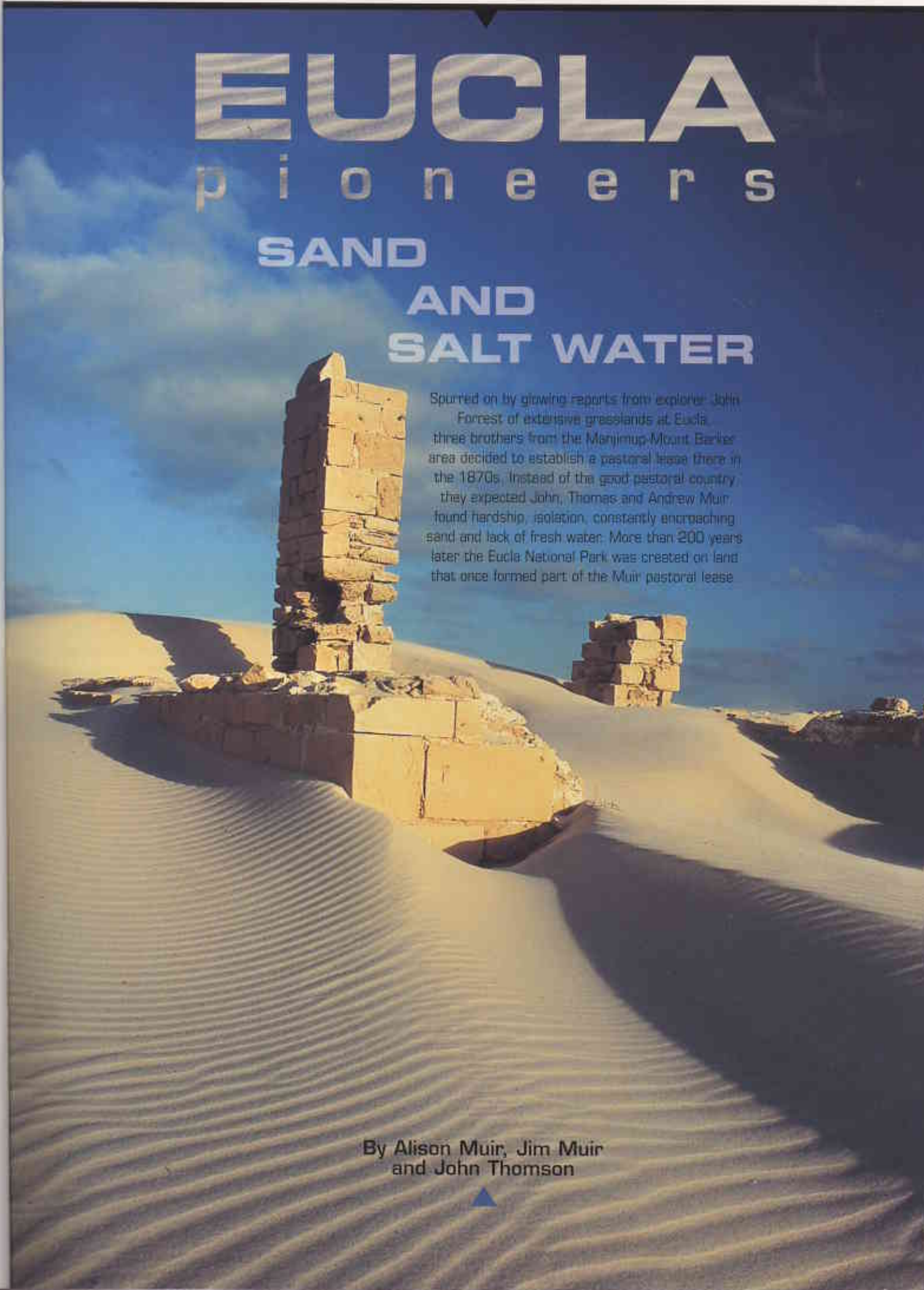
EUCLA pioneers

SAND AND SALT WATER

Spurred on by glowing reports from explorer John Forrest of extensive grasslands at Eucla, three brothers from the Manjimup-Mount Barker area decided to establish a pastoral lease there in the 1870s. Instead of the good pastoral country they expected John, Thomas and Andrew Muir found hardship, isolation, constantly encroaching sand and lack of fresh water. More than 200 years later the Eucla National Park was created on land that once formed part of the Muir pastoral lease.



By Alison Muir, Jim Muir and John Thomson

Eucla National Park, 730 kilometres east of Norseman and 1300 kilometres west of Adelaide, protects 3342 hectares of mallee-acacia scrub and heathland near the border of Western Australia and South Australia. The park's most significant features are Wilson Bluff, a high limestone cliff that provides a vantage point for viewing the spectacular sea cliffs of the Great Australian Bight, and the vast Delisser Sandhills. It was not these features but reports of potentially productive grasslands that attracted pastoralists such as the Muirs to this isolated spot in the 1870s.

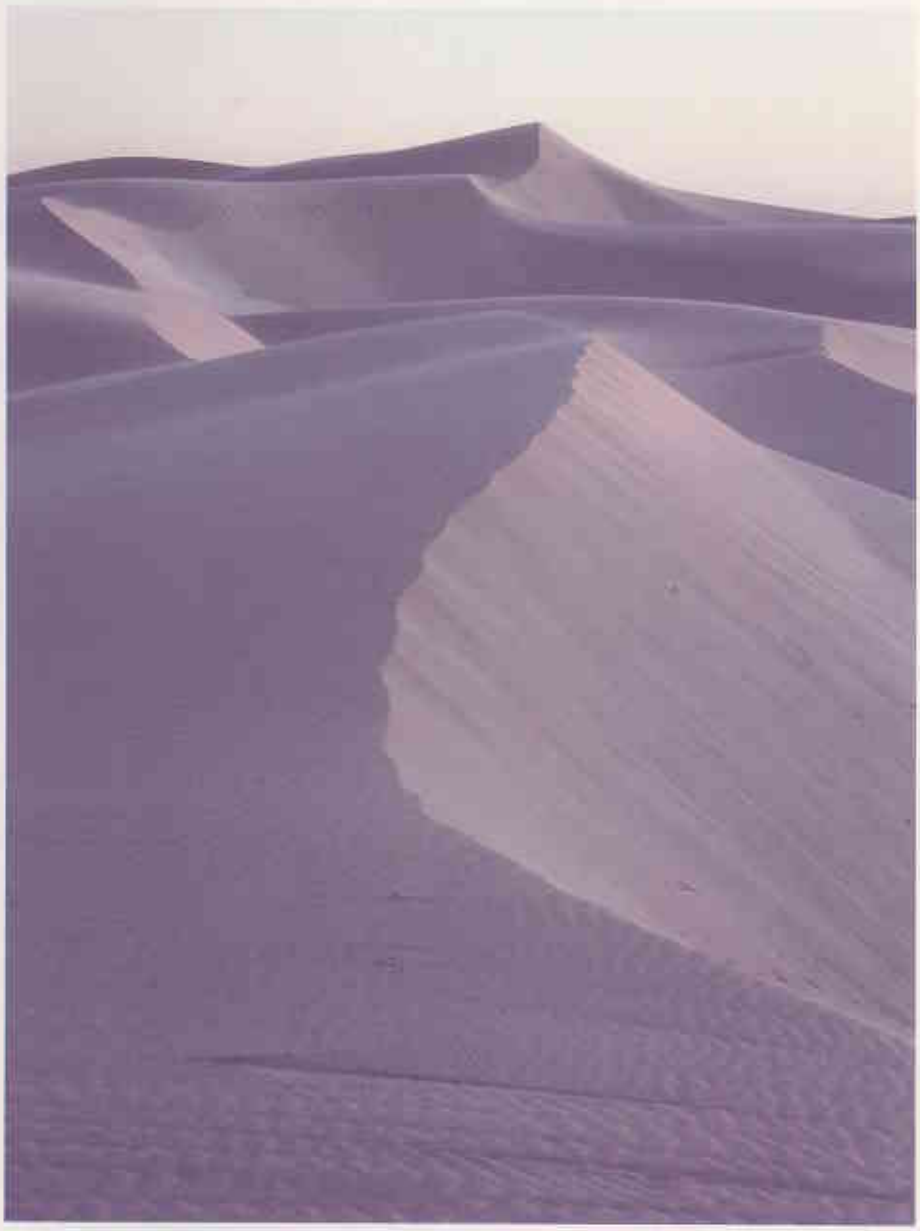
LURE OF THE LAND

The Muir brothers had all built thriving farms at various localities on the Muir Highway between Manjimup and Mount Barker. Thomas, the first European to settle near Manjimup, established a farm at 'Deeside' in 1856. John lived on the family property 'Forest Hill', near Mount Barker, while brother Andrew established holdings at 'Nabagup' and 'Lake Muir'. Many people would have been satisfied with these endeavours. However, pioneering blood ran thick through the Muir veins. So when explorer John Forrest described grasslands at Eucla in glowing terms, having traversed the area in 1870 during an exceptionally good season, the Muir brothers found the prospect of opening up the area irresistible. It was decided that Tom, John and Andrew would each spend two years there.

John Muir, accompanied by Nathan (whose surname is not known), ticket-of-leave men Patrick Kelly and Bill Peate, and an Aborigine known as Jackie, left Albany aboard the *Emily Smith* on 23 February 1872. They anchored at Eucla 11 days later, along with 650 sheep (20 died on the way), two horses, two sheep dogs and a year's provisions. Just a few hours later, brothers William and Andrew Dempster, together with Tom Kennedy and Jimmy Sales, arrived on the *Gipsy*. They brought the rest of John's equipment, consisting of sheet iron, a tank, a cart, blasting powder, fuses and tools. The Dempsters stayed only three weeks, after sinking two wells that turned out to be salty.

Jackie proved invaluable as he soon befriended the local Aboriginal people, who led the pioneers to water. John made the following observations of their appearance and means of subsistence:

> 'Some natives came to camp in the morning... They seem a harmless race, they have very few spears. They go entirely naked, men, women and children. The only ornaments I saw them with one [sic] had his beard rolled up with a piece of nulban and one had a few emu feathers in his hair. They do not seem to wilgee themselves or grease themselves at all... Their food at present seems to be only berries of which there are great quantities on the plains. I have seen a few places where they have dug out boodies [small rat kangaroos which subsequently became extinct from mainland Australia] and I have seen a few paddy melons [possibly



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The ruins of the Eucla Telegraph Station lie just outside the boundary of the Eucla National Park.
Photo – Steve Sadler

Left: The vast Delisser Sandhills are one of the most prominent features of Eucla National Park.
Photo – Bill Bachman

a banded hare-wallaby, rufous hare-wallaby or brush wallaby] and wallaby or tamar [sic]. They would not eat crows that we shot or an owl Jackie shot last night.'

The next day John noted that a native boy killed:

'a small animal like a bandicoot with longer ears and a smaller body and a black stripe across its rump - he called it wallyallaa - and a small lizard about 6 inches long with a head like a guana [sic] and a thick body of a yellowish colour which he called wakea.'

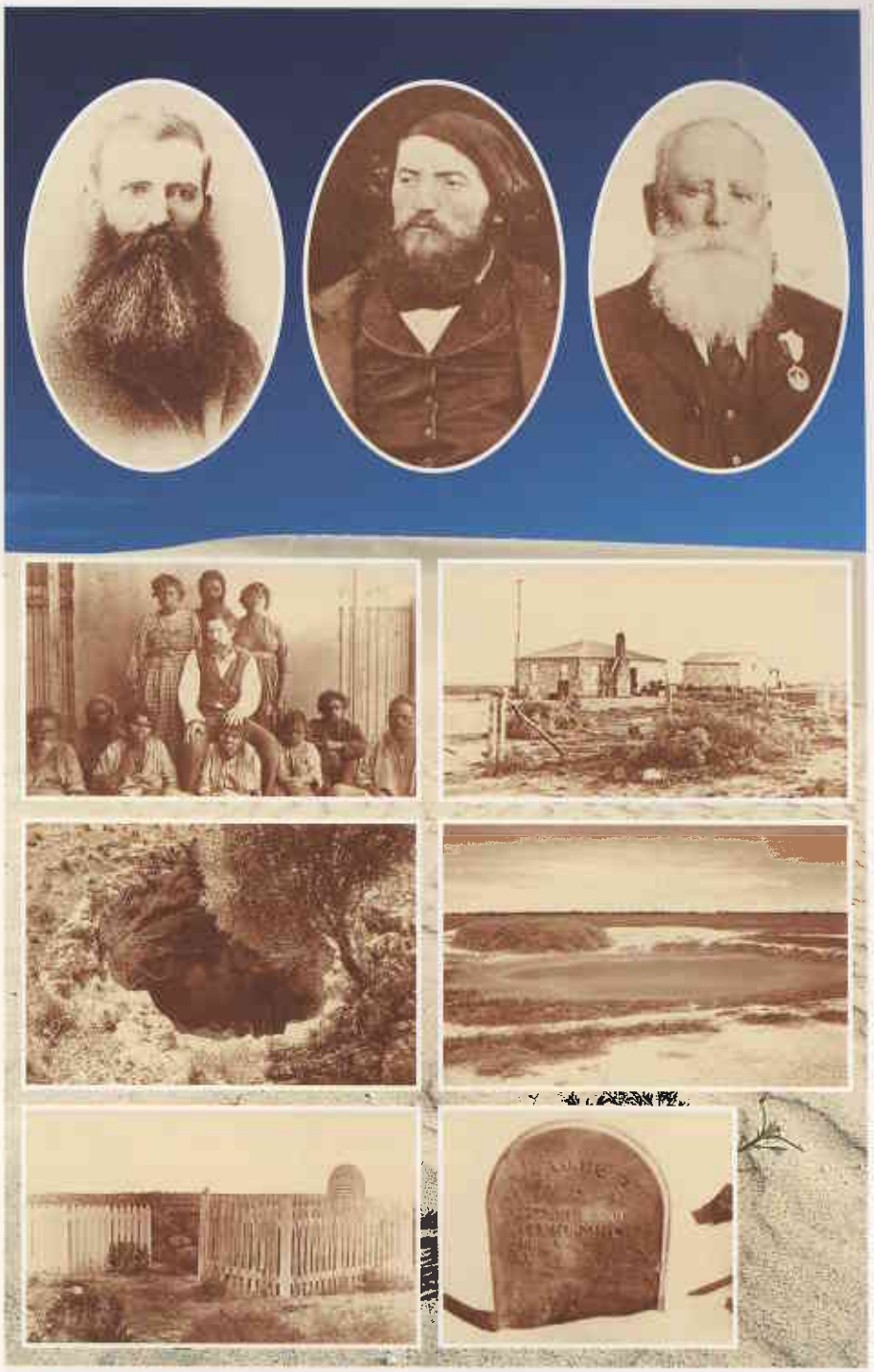
The mammal could have been a western barred bandicoot (which has long been extinct from mainland Australia) and the lizard was no doubt some kind of dragon.

The Eucla venture was much more difficult than the Muirs had envisaged. The search for new pastures and drinking water for their sheep was a constant concern. It proved too much for two in the party. Within two months of the Dempsters' departure, Bill and Pat, the ticket-of-leave men, headed for Adelaide, robbing John of his only horses, saddles and small water casks. His watch and revolver were also taken. Despite this setback, the new settlers managed by falling back on their resourcefulness, together with the vital assistance of the local Aboriginal people, who were a source of local knowledge and free labour. A shearing floor and pens were constructed from driftwood. It was 10 months before the *Emily Smith* called for wool and another three months before the ship returned from Albany with Thomas Muir, Jack Batt and another load of sheep.

Tom and William Kennedy and Jack McGill arrived at Eucla in August 1872, having taken two-and-a-half months to drive their sheep and bullocks overland from Esperance. The Muirs and Kennedys did their shearing together, shearing 3709 sheep in September 1873. They also cooperated to build a fishing boat from the remains of a whale-boat washed up on the beach.

SAND AND SALT WATER

John and Thomas Muir were able to locate the wells that had been dug by explorers John Eyre and John Forrest. They cleaned these out, enlarged them and set up troughs for watering sheep.



Top: Eucla pioneers Andrew Muir (left), John Muir (centre) and Thomas Muir (right).

Right: John's wife, Asenath, moved to Eucla with their four children in 1876.

Above group clockwise from left:

- Jack Batt with Aboriginal people at Eucla in about 1880.
- The 'Moopina' homestead built by the Muirs, photographed in the 1880s.
- The dam dug by the Muirs at the '8-mile'.
- One of the rare occasions this century when the grave of John Muir emerged from drift sand.
- The grave of John Muir and a local child photographed last century.
- A well, about 30 feet (9 m) deep, dug by the Muirs at Eucla. Water was a constant preoccupation.

Photos – Courtesy of Alison and Jim Muir.

There was little feed in the vicinity, and sand was constantly being blown into wells by strong winds. On 24 October 1873 Tom recorded that:

> 'The sand was blowing like a bush fire, going miles out to sea.'

Sand had to be constantly cleaned from water troughs and even the wells. It was back breaking work, and no doubt heart breaking too! The brothers ventured west and east, noting the names of native rock holes. The information they gathered was of great assistance when the overland telegraph was built a few years later. In spite of the strong winds and blowing sand, the pioneers persisted with improvements to the wells near the anchorage. They carted stone four miles from the cliffs to line the wells and made a trapdoor to cover the water. Favourable reports to Perth on their efforts earned them the 100 pounds offered by the Government to any persons who would supply water for public use at Eucla.

Tom's journal reveals that the weather and the possibility of rain was a constant preoccupation. Each day he recorded details of the presence or absence of clouds, and the wind direction. Some days they drew up to 1500 buckets of water, by hand, from wells, to keep the sheep going in the arid environment. Two men spent many weeks blasting a well through hard sandstone. Finally, at 133 feet, they struck water—salt water. Tom's only comment, or at least his only written comment, was: 'J.B. and Nathan got salt water at 133 feet'. 'Any amount of it,' he added with grim humour.

ROAST SEAGULL AND DAMPER

Tom was no gourmet according to his granddaughter Ethel. Her grandfather always said, 'food was getting too refined'. It was just as well. Tom described how he spent Christmas Day in 1873.

> 'Went with J. Batt to the South Australian [border]. Saw patch [of bush] over 12 miles. Went along the beach to ... [Wilsons] Bluff then up the cliffs for about a mile along the top, then went down scrambling over rocks ere we got on the beach again. Had dinner at the further patch, roast fowl—the fowl being sea gull—and damper. Nothing along the beach but two or three spurs. Started back and came along the cliffs. Got home after sundown. George had made a great pudding.'

However, it seems that a seagull now and again, salt meat and black tea, plus a lot of meal times without meals, didn't cramp Tom's style too much. He lived to his 94th year.

On 10 February 1874 the men fared somewhat better. Tom notes that he:

> 'Went out with the Chinaman [an Aborigine from Albany] to try and get a kangaroo. Shot one. He brought it all in, except the guts, and roasted it all. None was wasted. A kangaroo is not got

Above: The local Aboriginal people were called the Yirkala Mirning, and 'Yirkala' is believed to be the derivation of the name Eucla.
Photo – Steve Sadler

Left: Eucla pioneer John Muir described a bandicoot killed by a local Aboriginal boy—possibly a western barred bandicoot.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

here every day. The skin was the only part that we did not eat.'

However, after the plain food they had become used to, the kangaroo diet evidently proved too rich. The following day Tom recorded:

'I was quite unwell all the morning, so I laid down and took a little painkiller and after a while I felt better. Had a piece of damper and boiled a piece of mutton in my pannikin'.

The only ships to call regularly at Eucla until the overland telegraph was completed in 1877, were those chartered by the settlers themselves. Eucla was 800 miles from 'Deeside', where Tom had left wife Charlotte in charge of the farm after a stock manager pulled out of the job at the last minute. In those days, news and letters from home travelled slowly. A letter from Tom to his wife Charlotte on 15 April 1874 reveals just how slowly:

'The mail starts tomorrow. Good willing boys I have here [local Aborigines], so, if they get to F. [Fowlers] Bay on time, you will get this about the end of July or early August'.

In other words, two-and-a-half months at the earliest.

John's wife, Asenath, and their four children eventually moved to Eucla in 1876, taking up residence in the 'Moopina' homestead, built by the Muirs. After John Muir's death from pneumonia in 1878, at the age of 42, his wife and children moved to Port Augusta. Jack Batt stayed on until 1885 to manage the property. The venture never failed entirely, as the Muir brothers eventually sold out to an Adelaide stock company for £8000. John's remains are interred at Eucla, a short distance from the old telegraph station, but today his grave seldom emerges from coastal drift sand. The headstone has been moved to the museum in the Eucla Motel.

Top right: The ruins of the Eucla Telegraph Station and the nearby vegetation are gradually being buried in coastal sand drift.
Photo – Steve Sadler

Above right: The historic wooden jetty at Eucla.
Photo – Marie Lochman

Jim Muir, the grandson of Thomas Muir, farms a property near Manjimup. Together with wife Alison, he has written a history of the Muir family, from which much of the information for this article was taken. The rest of the story was written by John Thomson (now deceased) for the WA Historical Society. John was married to Jim's sister Ethel. The story was pieced together from these sources by long-time *LANDSCOPE* contributor Carolyn Thomson-Dans, a CALM Special Project Officer and great great grand-daughter of Thomas Muir. Carolyn can be contacted on (08) 9389 8644.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME THIRTEEN NUMBER 3, AUTUMN 1998

CALM's fight against feral cats gathers ground on Peron Peninsula with the development and testing of a cat bait. See 'Approaching Eden' on page 28.

Roadside vegetation often provides vital links between remnant habitats. See our story on page 23.

A new CALM book gives bushwalkers a host of short and longer walks in Western Australia's south-west. See page 10.

What attracted early pioneers to this barren corner of Western Australia? Find out in 'Eucla Pioneers' on page 35.

Fire is an important part of Western Australia's environment. Scientists continue to discover just how important. See page 17.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The splendid fairy wren was one of many birds collected by John Gilbert, whose collections of specimens have been fragmented over the past 100 years or so. Now, they are being tracked down in museums around the world, and a more complete picture of their original distributions is emerging from Gilbert's original notes and labels. See story on page 40.

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