



ALTHOUGH BETTER KNOWN FOR HIS EARLIER JOURNEYS ACROSS THE 'AUSTRALIA FELIX' OF WESTERN VICTORIA, EXPLORER-SURVEYOR THOMAS LIVINGSTONE MITCHELL JOURNEYED INTO WHAT IS NOW CENTRAL QUEENSLAND IN 1846. THE JOURNAL OF THIS EXPEDITION, PUBLISHED IN TWO VOLUMES TWO YEARS LATER,¹ IS EXAMINED HERE BY QUEENSLAND HISTORIAN ROSS JOHNSTON. THE JOURNAL REMAINS AN IMPORTANT ACCOUNT OF EARLY EUROPEAN EXPLORATION OF QUEENSLAND AND IS A VALUABLE ITEM IN THE FRYER COLLECTION.

Surveyor-General for the colony of New South Wales since 1828, Mitchell was an erudite man of taste and culture who had studied towards an Arts degree for at least two years at Edinburgh University. He read widely in foreign languages, sprinkling his *Journal* with quotations from Robbie Burns, Shakespeare, Milton and Ovid (in Latin). One authority on Mitchell calls him 'the civilised surveyor'.² Another of Mitchell's interests was landscape painting in which he was instructed by the important English Romantic painter, John Martin. The impact on him can be seen both in his naming discoveries after painters – the J Martin Range, the Claude River (named after the French painter Claude Lorrain), the Salvator River (honouring Salvator Rosa, the Italian painter) – and in the picturesque and painterly manner in which he describes scenes on the expedition:

The hills overhanging it [the river] surpassed any I had ever seen in picturesque outline. Some resembled gothic cathedrals in ruins; others forts; other masses were perforated, and being mixed and contrasted with the flowing outlines of evergreen woods, and having a fine stream in the foreground, gave a charming appearance to the whole country. It was a discovery worthy of the toils of a pilgrimage.³

Mitchell acknowledged and honoured many European figures of note in his naming of newly-discovered topographic features. Indeed, Mitchell was a master at networking, making and using important connections so patrons, promoters, supporters and experts (including scientists) had their names attached to mountains, rivers and other geographical markers – people such as the eminent botanist Sir William Hooker (a mountain) or the scientist Michael Faraday (a mountain also, in this region). Mt Mudge was named after the colonel who in the army taught Mitchell the use of the Syphon barometer.⁴

Military and imperial affairs also influenced his naming process. Perhaps the most unctuous example of this came on 1 October 1846, as he followed a river to the north-west, a water-course which he believed and hoped would flow eventually in a northerly direction into the Gulf of Carpentaria.

This river seemed to me typical of God's providence, in conveying living waters into a dry parched land, and thus affording access to open and extensive pastoral regions, likely to be soon peopled by civilised inhabitants. It was with sentiments of devotion, zeal, and loyalty, that I therefore gave to this river the name of my gracious sovereign, Queen Victoria.⁵



Mitchell's imperial vision was mistaken, however. In 1847-48 Edmund Kennedy established that the river flowed to the south-west, into the dry interior. He renamed it the Barcoo. Mitchell, however, was not wedded to European nomenclature; he has influenced toponymy considerably in Australia through his advocacy of Aboriginal place names. He lamented 'the uselessness of new names', and defended 'the necessity for preserving the native names of Rivers'.⁶ He would go in deliberate search of a local person to communicate about the native name. While this was not always possible, names he recorded on his maps such as Mount Bigando and the Belyando River came from local sources.⁷

The journal of an expedition also helps us to examine some of the controversies that surrounded Mitchell. An early biographer adverted to his 'pursuit of fame', his 'obstinacy and petulance', his 'persistent defiance of successive governors' and sustained conflicts with the Colonial Office; noting that he 'never doubted' his superiority.⁸ Don Baker refers to his self-righteousness, and categorises Mitchell as 'a poor administrator'.⁹ Certainly there were difficulties and dissatisfactions in the Survey Department which he headed. Yet on exploring expeditions he was an efficient leader heading a successful team effort.

One must be aware of his military experience and bearing; there are more than shades of the martinet. He had served in the Peninsular War 1811-14 where he gained favour from his commanding officer, Sir George Murray. Mitchell ran his expeditions as he would a 'civil' military campaign; he planned well; he controlled the provision of rations, forage, water, transport for his men and stock; he took steps to defend his camps from Aboriginal attack.

Certainly the men on this, his fourth exploration, seem to have had respect for and trust in him. His party, twenty-nine strong, included twenty-three convicts, several of whom had served on previous expeditions. The tent-keeper had been on Mitchell's three previous expeditions. Two others (the storekeeper and the barometer carrier) had been with him on the third expedition, while another (in charge of horses) had been on the second expedition.¹⁰ Mitchell preferred convicts to free men for the many manual tasks involved; he found it easier to demand obedience and discipline from them – with the promise of relief from their punishment upon the successful completion of the journey. On this expedition Mitchell had disciplinary problems with six of the convicts, but most of them behaved well.¹¹

A second debate concerns the accuracy and veracity of Mitchell's reports and drawings. Don Baker opines that Mitchell was 'perhaps the best draftsman in the British army'.¹²

At school Mitchell was keen on drawing – ‘to convey accurate information’.¹³ In the Spanish military campaign Mitchell’s main task was surveying; this is where he learned his craft. Sir George Murray was sufficiently impressed later to charge Mitchell to complete plans and maps of the principal movements, battles and sieges of that war. These Mitchell published in 1841.¹⁴ Mitchell’s competency and accuracy as a surveyor and map-maker are generally acknowledged; yet a study by Brian Finlayson, employing recent scientific analyses and aerial surveys, seriously questions this reputation for accuracy, claiming that Mitchell is ‘not a reliable factual witness’ of the pre-European environment in Australia.¹⁵ Finlayson’s is a detailed study of Lake Salvator which Mitchell ‘found’ on 7 July 1846. The party spent some days at this large feature, recording various descriptions. Finlayson concludes that Mitchell has invented a myth about the existence of this lake. There never was one; at the most it was a swamp or a braided stream. Finlayson speculates that Mitchell set out deliberately to deceive – embellishing discoveries so as to enhance his reputation as an explorer. Similarly, Mitchell’s biographer Cumpston is ready to see deceit in Mitchell’s actions, claiming Mitchell rushed to London in 1847 to get his journal published quickly and so establish his fame. ‘Mitchell makes no reference to the fact that Kennedy had completely disproved his claim that the Barcoo [Mitchell’s Victoria River] would ultimately discharge into the Gulf of Carpentaria’.¹⁶ This is a harsh and unfair judgement; Kennedy did not return to Sydney from his journey along the Barcoo (having established that it flowed south-west into the dry interior) until 8 February 1848. Mitchell’s *Journal* was already in press in London, appearing between 19 and 26 February of that year.

Mitchell was busy preparing his manuscript for publication during 1847. He had already published in two volumes an account of his 1831, 1835 and 1836 expeditions.¹⁷ That publication had been well-received and had enhanced his reputation. This fourth journey, however, had been beset by problems, especially administrative delays. Since 1831 Mitchell had wanted to ‘discover’ northern Australia. Initially interest focused on establishing an overland route to Port Essington (in the Northern Territory). In 1843 Mitchell proposed this fourth journey – but Governor Gipps procrastinated. Dr Ludwig Leichhardt stepped in, arranging a private expedition overland to Port Essington. When Mitchell finally gained approval, with a subsidy of £2000 from the Legislative Council to mount the expedition,¹⁸ Leichhardt’s fate was still unknown; perhaps he was lost, or had perished. It was only on 18 April 1846, four months into his exploring,

at St George’s Bridge that Mitchell received information that Leichhardt had returned having reached Port Essington. Mitchell therefore focussed on discovering an overland route via a northerly-flowing river to the Gulf of Carpentaria.¹⁹ That would establish the shortest route to India and the East and enable trade. He was disappointed when traveling down the Belyando to find it flowing towards the Pacific Ocean and not the Gulf. He then chose a westerly-flowing stream, to a point where on 15 September he could exclaim:

I found then, at last, the realisation of my long cherished hopes, an interior river falling to the N.W. in the heart of an open country extending also in that direction.... From that rock, the scene was so extensive as to leave no room for doubt as to the course of the river, which, thus and there revealed to me alone, seemed like a direct reward from Heaven for perseverance, and as a compensation for the many sacrifices I had made, in order to solve the question as to the interior rivers of Tropical Australia.²⁰

Explorers need to work to a hunch, on inspiration, by assumption, with a hypothesis. In this case, Mitchell was deceived. Anxious to return home from a long, hard trip, and running short of food, he saw a northerly-flowing stream through the trees, and assumed/wanted his hopes to be fulfilled. If he had continued further he would have found that this was not the main river but a branch, and that the river turned to the west and south.²¹

He did not know his mistake when he arrived in London in late July 1847, with ten boxes containing mainly botanical specimens and maps.²² He set to preparing the manuscript for publication. The specimens had been collected by Mitchell himself as well as other members of the party, and especially Dr W Stephenson, the surgeon and collector. At Mantuan Downs Mitchell had recorded: ‘we found a plateau of flowering shrubs, chiefly new and strange, so that Mr. Stephenson was soon loaded like a market gardener’.²³ Numbers of new species were located. At Fitzroy Downs he was intrigued by ‘trees of very droll form ... The trunk bulged out in the middle like a barrel’. These were bottle trees (see *illustration p. 6*) which he named *Delabechea*, after Sir Henry T De La Beche, president of the Horticultural Society.²⁴

Baker argues that Mitchell did not learn from the Aborigines how to live off the land.²⁵ Occasionally they tried local plants – such as a wild carrot, a native cucumber, and a large pea (that gave the



Right:
Top: ‘River Maranoa,
28th October’, Mitchell,
Journal, opposite
p. 372

Bottom: Major
Mitchell’s Cockatoo,
Lophochroa
leadbeateri, GM
Mathews, *The birds*
of Australia, *Witherby*,
London, 1916-17, v. 6,
opposite p. 190



men diarrhoea – ‘violent vomiting and purging’). Mitchell did, however, supplement the regular diet of mutton (the party started out with 250 live sheep) and flour with game shot – such as emu, pigeon and turkey (such ‘delicious flesh’).²⁶

Mitchell used his connections with scientists who could identify, classify and describe the many discoveries. This was a time of scientific imperialism, when western scientists were wanting to classify (and claim) the unknown world. His experts included Sir William Hooker, Director of Kew Gardens; Dr John Lindley who held the Chair of Botany at the University of London; George Bentham who had been secretary to the Horticultural Society.²⁷ These three prepared a detailed report on over 600 plants, which Mitchell had to interpolate into his account of the expedition, with Latin inscriptions, at the appropriate place. He also sought help from other specialists, such as Professor WH de Vriese, a Dutch botanist and WS Macleay, the Australian naturalist. Mitchell was fascinated with fossils; he found remains near the Pyramids depot and at Mt Sowerby;²⁸ for scientific verification of them he turned to Professor Sir Richard Owen, Edward Forbes and William Ogilby. Meanwhile, Mitchell was preparing his maps. Five covering the journey were drawn and reduced by Mitchell, two more were general.

Mitchell had hoped the House of John Murray would publish his account but it declined because Leichhardt’s journal was about to appear.²⁹ Longman, Brown, Green and

Longmans picked up the job and the book was ready for sale by late February 1848. It was not as successful as his earlier *Three expeditions* receiving mixed reviews. Kerry Heckenberg suggests this occurred because the genre of travel books (with which explorers’ journals were grouped) was changing.³⁰ The frequent Latin interpolations made Mitchell’s *Journal* a mix of scientific information and entertainment, at a time when the reading public was beginning to ask for one or the other.

In seeking to unlock to western eyes the interior of northern Australia, Mitchell well knew that he was preparing the way for colonisation and settlement.³¹ Thus he wanted (and needed) to find and to describe broad fertile pastoral expanses. His writing fluency allowed him to encapsulate such visions and dreams. His *Journal* is still valuable on two main grounds. One is his environmental, topographic observations – he provides the first written account of parts of Australia, albeit sometimes inaccurate and often embellished. In this article I have concentrated on this aspect of his writing, especially in relation to the central highlands of Queensland. I take an extended sense of ‘environment’ to encompass surveying, mapping and artistic interpretation, as well as topography, botany and allied scientific studies. The other value of the *Journal* is Mitchell’s descriptions of the different Aboriginal groups he encountered – their lifestyles, behaviour, housing, food, culture generally. This is a separate study.³²

REFERENCES

1. TL Mitchell, *Journal of an expedition into the interior of tropical Australia, in search of a route from Sydney to the Gulf of Carpentaria*, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, London, 1848.
2. DWA Baker, *The civilised surveyor: Thomas Mitchell and the Australian Aborigines*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1977, pp. 12, passim.
3. Mitchell, *Journal*, p. 298.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 240, 392.
5. *Ibid*, pp. 332-3.
6. *Ibid*, p. 69.
7. *Ibid*, pp. 161, 242-3, 269.
8. JHL Cumpston, *Thomas Mitchell, surveyor general and explorer*, Oxford University Press, London, 1954, pp. 227-9.
9. Baker, *Civilised surveyor*, p. 2; *Australian dictionary of biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967, vol. 2, p. 241.
10. WC. Foster, *Sir Thomas Livingston [sic] Mitchell and his world 1792–1855; Surveyor General of New South Wales 1828–1855*, Institution of Surveyors NSW, Sydney, 1985, p. 373.
11. DWA Baker, ‘Thomas Mitchell as explorer’, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 80, nos 1-2, 1994, pp. 33-4.
12. DWA Baker, ‘Wanderers in Eden: Thomas Mitchell compared with Lewis and Clark’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 19, 1995, p. 5.
13. Baker, *Civilised surveyor*, p. 2.
14. TL Mitchell et al., *Maps and plans, showing the principal movements, battles, and sieges, in which the British Army was engaged during the War from 1808 to 1814, in the Spanish Peninsula and the south of France*. James Wyld, London, 1841.
15. B Finlayson, ‘Sir Thomas Mitchell and Lake Saluator: an essay in ecological history’, *Historical Studies*, vol. 21, no. 83, 1984, pp. 212, 226-8.
16. Cumpston, p. 196.
17. TL Mitchell, *Three expeditions into the interior of eastern Australia, with descriptions of the recently explored regions of Australia Felix, and the present colony of New South Wales*, 2 vols., T & W Boone, London, 1838.
18. Foster, p. 372.
19. Mitchell, *Journal*, pp. 4, 130, 260, 272, 279, 319.
20. *Ibid*, p. 309.
21. Foster, p. 404.
22. *Ibid*, p. 411.
23. Mitchell, *Journal*, p. 290.
24. *Ibid*, pp. 153-4.
25. Baker, ‘Wanderers’, pp. 7-8.
26. Mitchell, *Journal*, pp. 7, 278, 281, 283, 317, 336, 352.
27. Foster, pp. 411-12; K Heckenberg, ‘What Sir Thomas Mitchell omits from his *Journal of an expedition into the interior of tropical Australia* (1848)’, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, vol. 16, 1997, p. 257.
28. Mitchell, *Journal*, pp. 344, 364 (re fossils).
29. Foster, p. 412.
30. Heckenberg, p. 256.
31. See commentaries by S Ryan, *The cartographic eye: how explorers saw Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 25, 68-9; P Carter, *The road to Botany Bay: an essay in spatial history*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987, pp. 103, 106, 108, 132-5.
32. Baker, *The civilised surveyor*, gives an overview of this subject.