

Historical Roads of New South Wales

*MITCHELL  
HIGHWAY*



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NEW SOUTH WALES



The Mitchell Highway, S.H. 7, between Narromine and Nyngan.

## Historical Roads of New South Wales

### The Mitchell Highway

On the 9th October, 1936, by proclamation in the Government Gazette, the road from Bathurst, through Bourke to the Queensland border at Barringun, formerly known as the North-western Highway (State Highway No. 7), was named the Mitchell Highway in order to perpetuate the name of Sir Thomas Mitchell, one time Surveyor-General of New South Wales and a noted Australian explorer.

The recent centenary of his death, on the 5th October, 1855, provides a fitting opportunity to record in "Main Roads" something of the life and work of Mitchell and of the road which now bears his name.

#### Thomas Livingstone Mitchell.

The future explorer was born at Craighend, Scotland, on the 15th June, 1792. At the age of seventeen he entered the service of his uncle in the management of a colliery but in July, 1811, he was gazetted a Second Lieutenant in the Army. His regiment, the 95th Regiment of Foot, formed part of the famous Light Division which played a decisive part in the Peninsular War and in the Crimea.

Shortly after joining his regiment in Portugal, Mitchell became attached to the staff of the Duke of Wellington and was engaged on topographical and sur-



Sir Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor-General.

vey intelligence work. Although there is no clear evidence that he had had early training as a surveyor, during the last year of the war in the Peninsular he was continuously engaged in field survey work through some of the most difficult country in Europe.

With the ending of the war approval was given to the making of full plans of all the Peninsular battlefields and Mitchell was selected for the task. To complete this work he was stationed at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, England. Of the maps and plans prepared by Mitchell at Sandhurst, Sir William Napier in his "History of the Peninsular War" wrote: "Captain Mitchell's drawings were made by him after the war, by order of the Government and at public expense. . . . Never was money better laid out, for I believe no topographical drawings, whether they be considered by accuracy of detail, perfection of manner, or beauty of execution, ever exceeded Mitchell's."

In January, 1827, Mitchell was offered the position of principal assistant in the general survey of New South Wales and the Governor, Sir Ralph Darling, was informed by the Permanent Under Secretary at the British Colonial Office—R. W. Hay—that Mitchell was to be "considered as standing next in rank to Mr. Oxley, whom he will ultimately succeed". Mr. Oxley was, at the time, Surveyor-General.

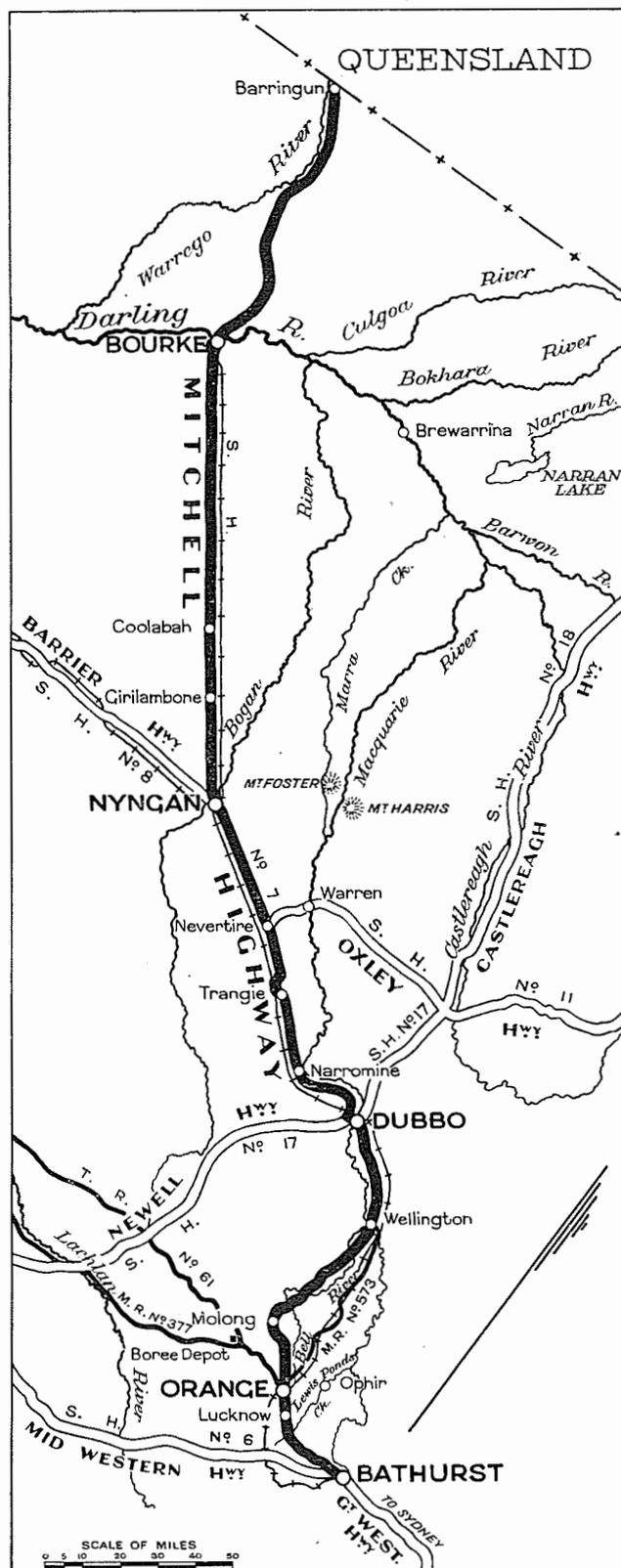
Major Mitchell, as he was then, arrived in Sydney on the 23rd September, 1827, and at once took up duty as Deputy Surveyor-General. Six months later, because of the long and severe illness of Oxley, Mitchell was placed in charge of the Survey Office and two months later, on the 28th May, 1828, he was appointed Surveyor-General, Oxley having died.

From being a surveyor and draftsman, although of proved ability, Mitchell, only eight months after his arrival, was required to assume administrative responsibility over a vast area of which little was known and within which social conditions of unusual complexity were rapidly evolving.

To add to his problems, progress made in the survey of the country was unsatisfactory. A newspaper of the period, "The Monitor", commented on "the dreadful situation of grants of land owing to the state of the Surveyor's Office".

In 1827 the Governor had reported to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Rt. Hon. W. Huskisson, that in many cases the settlers were not assured of the extent or limits of their property and their boundaries, when they came to be measured, would be found to overlap owing to the vague descriptions given by the settlers when reporting upon selections they had made. Others had settled upon land to which they had no claim and having established themselves, were not disposed to yield to those who had obtained a grant of the same selection.

A few weeks after his actual assumption of office, Mitchell had informed the Governor that he was of opinion that a proper trigonometrical survey was an essential preliminary to more detailed surveys. The Governor agreed with this view and authorised a commencement of the work.



### Earlier Exploration.

At this period there were only three main roads leading out of Sydney to the other parts of the colony, viz., the western road from Sydney via the Blue Mountains to Bathurst; the southern road via Camden and Picton to Moss Vale and Sutton Forest; and the northern road to Maitland via Wiseman's Ferry.

In 1824, Hume and Hovell had made their important southern journey overland to Port Phillip (Victoria) and Oxley had carried out journeys of exploration down the Lachlan and Macquarie Rivers and had formed the opinion that each of these ended in a great inland sea. In 1818 he had gone eastward from Mt. Harris (near Nyngan) to the coast, had crossed the Liverpool Plains and had followed the Hastings River to Port Macquarie.

From 1818 until 1827 there was no northward exploration but in that year Allan Cunningham went overland to the Darling Downs (Queensland) and in the following year, going by sea to Brisbane and from there, moving inland, connecting with his previous journey, he defined an overland route from Sydney to Brisbane.

Following Cunningham's return from this journey, Governor Darling sent Captain Charles Sturt to ascertain the course of the Macquarie River and to test Oxley's theory regarding an inland sea. He was to report also on the extent and description of the surrounding country. To this expedition, Hamilton Hume was attached.

**Sir Charles Augustus Fitzroy, Governor of New South Wales, 1846-55.**



**Old Inn near the Highway at Shadforth.**

On this journey Sturt moved westward from the Macquarie Marshes, at which Oxley's first journey had ended, and discovered the Darling River near the site of the town of Bourke. He also showed that the Bogan, Macquarie and Castlereagh Rivers all joined the Darling and proved that, at least in the country crossed, there was no inland sea.

The British Colonial Office had, in the meantime, become interested in the Murrumbidgee River and had requested that its exploration should be undertaken. To the disappointment of Mitchell this work also was entrusted to Sturt and an expedition left Sydney on the 3rd November, 1829, in an endeavour to determine the course of that river.

Sturt travelled down the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers. He discovered and identified the Darling River junction with the Murray and pressed on until he was able to prove that the Murray flowed into the sea at Lake Alexandrina (South Australia).

In 1831 a runaway convict named George Clark surrendered to the authorities and reported the discovery by him of a river which the natives called "Kindur" and a fine country to the north of the Liverpool Plains. Mitchell had been anxious for an opportunity to undertake exploration and he secured authority to investigate the truth or otherwise of Clark's story. He left Sydney on the 24th November, 1831, and, after crossing the Peel and Namoi Rivers, reached the Gwydir River and turned north to discover, in January, 1832, a river called "Karaula" by the natives, but which is now named "Macintyre." At this point his progress was interrupted by the failure of supplies and he decided to return.

On his forward journey Mitchell had established a camp on the Barwon River near where Mungindi now stands and he had intended travelling back along the Macintyre and Barwon Rivers by means of a flat-bottomed boat which he had built from trees felled in the locality of the camp. The Macintyre River was, however, found to be filled with fallen timber and obstructed by rocks over which the heavy boat could not be carried. The journey was therefore made by land to the junction of the Barwon and the Gwydir from where the party proceeded to the line of their outward journey and so back to Sydney.



Monument to  
Major Mitchell  
on Mt. Canobolas  
which he ascended  
in 1835.

Four years elapsed before Mitchell had further opportunity to engage in exploration. In order to prove Sturt's theory that the Darling flowed into the Murray, which Mitchell doubted, the Colonial Office had suggested to Governor Bourke, who had succeeded Governor Darling, that Sturt should be employed in exploring the course of the Darling River. Before this suggestion reached Australia Sturt had left for England and, as the Governor had previously been advised by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Viscount Goderich, that expeditions of exploration were to be conducted by the Surveyor-General's Department, he instructed Mitchell to undertake the task.

The expedition left Parramatta on the 9th March, 1835, and proceeded to a point 19 miles west of Orange, where a depot named by Mitchell "Buree" (now Boree), was established. The site of the depot is marked by a cairn of stones erected by the Boree Shire Council at the junction of the Orange-Manildra Road (Trunk Road No. 61) with the Eugowra Road (Main Road No. 377). By the 15th April, 1835, the party had reached the Bogan, the course of which was followed to the site of Nyngan and on to near where Bourke now stands where a base depot, named by Mitchell Fort Bourke, was established.

Mitchell then moved down the Darling River towards what is now Wilcannia, and finally to the site of Menindie at which point he decided to end the journey. The particular object of the expedition had not been achieved and the question as to whether the Darling flowed into the Murray or not was still not determined.

To clear the matter up one way or the other Mitchell was instructed to undertake another journey—his third—to rejoin the Darling at the point of termination of

the previous exploration and to complete the survey of that river to its junction with the Murray or, if it was found that the Darling did not join the Murray, to follow the Darling to the sea wherever that might be.

Leaving the Boree depot on the 17th March, 1836, Mitchell followed Oxley's tracks down the Lachlan River; found that this river joined the Murrumbidgee as Sturt had said; then followed the Murray River to the Darling, which he confirmed was that river, and returned to the junction of the Murray and the Murrumbidgee Rivers.

Mitchell then followed the Murray easterly to a point near Swan Hill now stands and, striking south-west, crossed what is now Western Victoria, reaching the coast at Discovery Bay (near the Victorian-South Australian border), from where he returned to Sydney. So impressed was he with the country south of the Murray that he named the region "Australia Felix, the better to distinguish it from the parched deserts of the interior country . . ."

#### **Mitchell's Fourth Journey.**

The fourth, and last, expedition of exploration undertaken by Sir Thomas Mitchell—he had been knighted in 1839, and in the same year the University of Oxford conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law—was designed to serve two principal purposes. In 1843 Governor Gipps had written to the Colonial Secretary, Rt. Hon. E. E. Stanley, informing him that the Legislative Council had appointed a committee to investigate the practicability of an overland route to Port Essington (Northern Territory). Not only was it believed that good, well grassed country would be found in the areas that would be traversed, but a considerable trade in horses, required in India

for military purposes, was developing and Port Essington was considered to be a convenient port for shipment if a practicable route thereto could be discovered.

The Governor had advised that both Sturt and Eyre had offered to undertake the task, but their estimates of cost put the project beyond the resources of the Government. He had informed the British Government that Mitchell considered the project practicable and was prepared to lead an expedition.

Approval to the expedition "as soon as the funds of the Colony could properly bear the expense" was given the Governor in May, 1844. In November, 1845, the Governor informed the Colonial Office that he had fitted out an expedition to proceed overland by way of Bathurst and Fort Bourke, and thence either direct to Port Essington or to the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria, at Mitchell's discretion.

A young German doctor, Ludwig Leichhardt, had been interested in the project from the beginning and had intended accompanying Mitchell on the journey. Becoming impatient at the delay he persuaded friends to fit out a private exploring party which, with himself as leader, left Sydney in August, 1844.

Sturt and Eyre had earlier proposed starting from Moreton Bay (Brisbane) and following the coast to Halifax Bay (Townsville) and thence overland to the Gulf and Port Essington. Leichhardt more or less followed this plan, except that his track ran parallel to the coast, about 100 miles inland, as far as the Burdekin River and then overland to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Mitchell considered that a shorter, more direct course should be taken instead of the more circuitous route via Halifax Bay. In this view he had the support of the Legislative Council, although the Governor considered the more feasible, and less hazardous, route was that which followed the coast.

The main party set out from Parramatta on the 17th November, 1845. Mitchell himself joining the party at

the Boree depot on the 13th December. Mitchell closely followed his former track to the headwaters of the Bogan River and then down that river to the site of Nyngan which was reached on the 16th January, 1846. From there a move was made to a point named by Mitchell, Canbelego. This was not the place now known by that name but was a spot in the vicinity of what is now called Grahweed, about 30 miles north of Nyngan. Camp was made at this place while Mitchell scouted forward in search of water.

Absence of water, even in the Bogan Channel, caused an alteration of the explorer's plans. He recorded: "I turned at length, reluctantly, convinced that it would have been unsafe to venture with cattle and drays into these regions before rain fell." He abandoned the Bogan and, moving in a direction slightly north of east, came to the Marra Creek at a point about 12 miles north-west of Mount Foster. At this point the party met two mounted policemen who gave them news of a flood coming down the Macquarie. Being thus reasonably assured of water Mitchell decided to follow the Macquarie down to its junction with the Darling. He gives in his journal a graphic description of the arrival of the flood waters. "Some hours later," he wrote, "and after the moon had risen, a murmuring sound like that of a distant waterfall mingled with occasional cracks as of breaking timber, drew our attention and I hastened to the river bank. By very slow degrees the sound grew louder and at length, so audible as to draw various persons besides from the camp to the river side. Still no flood appeared, although its approach was indicated by the occasional rending of trees with a loud noise. Such a phenomenon in a serene moonlight night was quite new to us all. At length the rushing sound of waters and loud cracking of timbers announced that the flood was in the next bend. It rushed into our sight, glittering in the moonbeams, a moving cataract, tossing before it ancient trees, and snapping them against its banks . . . By my party, situated as we

**Bridge over the Macquarie River on the Mitchell Highway, Wellington.**



were at that time, beating about the country and impeded in our journey, solely by the almost total absence of water—suffering excessively from thirst and extreme heat—I am convinced the scene never can be forgotten

Mitchell now travelled northwards along the western edge of the Macquarie marshes to the Darling at its junction with the Macquarie. Still travelling northwards, but now guided by some natives, he reached the Narran Lagoon and then followed the course of the Narran River to the site of Angeldool and crossing what is now the Queensland border at about 12 miles east of Hebel, reached its junction with the Balonne River, where Dirranbandi now stands, on the 1st April, 1846. Following now the Balonne, the site of the present town of St. George was reached twelve days later and here Mitchell determined to establish a base camp and himself, with a light party, to push on more quickly.

Two days after leaving he was overtaken by two men despatched from the base camp with the news that Leichhardt had reached Sydney on his return from Port Essington. It thus became known to Mitchell that "he could no longer hope to be the first to reach the shore of the Indian Ocean by land."

The news he had received caused Mitchell to alter his plans and he "determined, if possible, to penetrate northward into the interior country and ascertain where the division of the waters was likely to be found. I intended with this view," he wrote, "to trace upwards the course of the Balonne until I found mountains to the north-west of it; then to endeavour to turn them by the west, and thus acquire some knowledge on that most interesting point, the watershed towards the Gulf."

Instead, therefore, of establishing a base camp at St. George, he left the main party there for three weeks

so as to rest the cattle, and arranged for his second in charge, Assistant Surveyor E. B. Kennedy, to follow his tracks after the expiration of this period. Meanwhile he went forward with a small party, as originally intended, and later reached the Maranoa River near the present Queensland town of Mitchell where Kennedy and the main party overtook them.

A base camp was established at this point and Mitchell and his light party pushed on until finally, after much difficulty, they penetrated to about 140 miles beyond the Tropic of Capricorn to a point on the Belyando River near Mount Douglas. Mitchell had actually reached within a few miles of Leichhardt's track of seventeen months previously although, of course, this was not known to him.

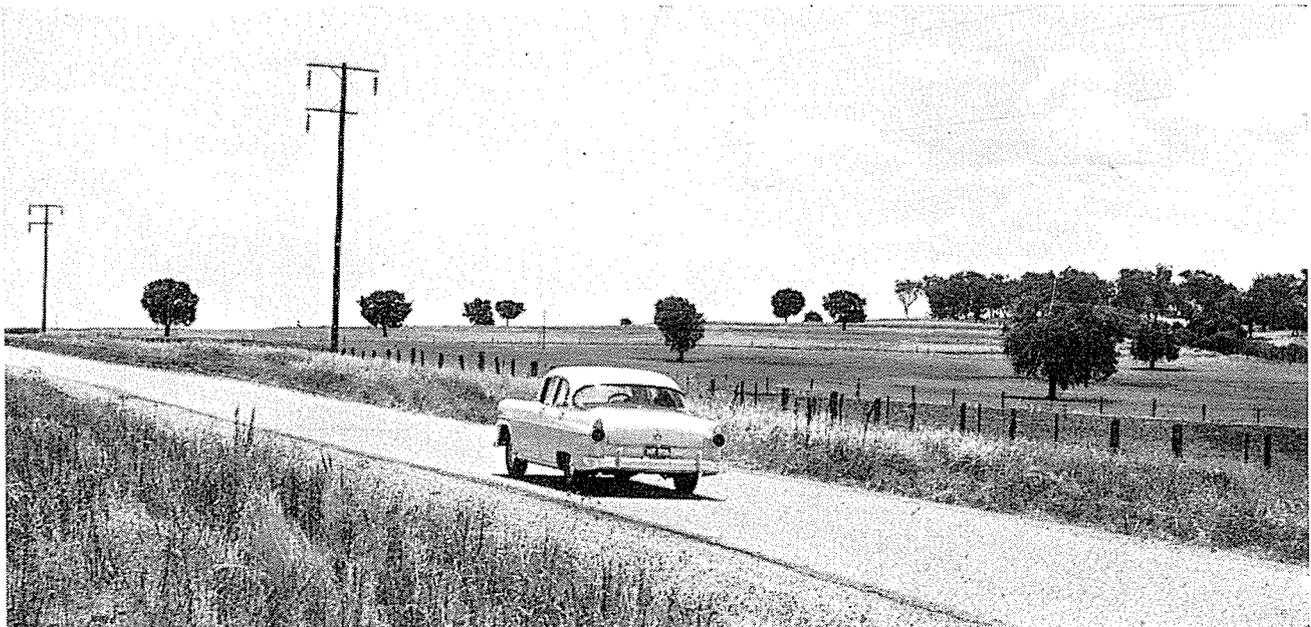
By this time Mitchell had realised that the direction he had taken would not lead to his objective and as the natives were threatening and he could, by going further, only cover ground already crossed, he decided to return. Mitchell, travelling ahead, reached Sydney on the 29th December, 1846, and the rest of the party under Kennedy, on the 20th January, 1847.

Although he did not accomplish the main purpose of the expedition, the discovery of a practicable overland route to Port Essington, Mitchell added greatly to the knowledge of the interior and opened up large new territories for occupation and settlement.

#### Early Road Communications.

Although as early as about 1820 settlement began in the districts west of Bathurst there is no record of any defined road system until much later and communication between the outlying districts and the more settled parts was by means of tracks formed by the settlers themselves or by the aboriginal tribes which inhabited the area.

#### Highway and countryside between Wellington and Dubbo.





**Mitchell Highway approaching Dubbo.**

On the map prepared by Captain Martindale in 1857 to accompany his first report on the internal communications of New South Wales, a "minor" road is shown connecting Bathurst with Dubbo via Orange and Wellington. In 1861 Parliament voted the sum of £10,500 for the "Maintenance and repair of the road from Sydney to Wellington". This expenditure was not without effect, for in 1865 the "Commissioner and Engineer for Roads", William C. Bennett, in a "Report on the state of the Roads in the Colony of New South Wales" stated that "on the Western-road the mail time to Bathurst has been reduced one half; from Bathurst to Wellington the acceleration has not been material; the cost on this line has been decreased by nearly 50 per cent." He also showed that whereas in 1857 the carriage of goods from Sydney to Wellington occupied from thirty-five to forty-five days and cost between £25 and £30 per ton, by 1864 the time of transit had been reduced to from twenty-one to twenty-eight days and the cost to between £11 and £12 per ton.

In Bailliere's Gazetteer Map of 1866 a road is shown from Bathurst, through Orange, Wellington and Dubbo to Mt. Harris and thence by way of the Macquarie, Barwon and Darling Rivers to Bourke. A post office map of 1881 shows a network of mail routes linking the towns which, by then, had been established in the Western district but the direct mail route from Sydney via Bathurst did not go beyond Wellington. This route, however, connected at Orange with one that passed through Molong, Wellington and Dubbo and thence north-easterly to Walgett via Warren and Mt. Harris. At Warren, junction was made with another route that went through Nyngan, Girilambone and Bourke to Barrington. By 1881, therefore, the route of the road later to be known as the Mitchell Highway was fairly well established. Later that part of the road between Narromine and Nyngan was altered to a route along the railway.

#### **The Present Route of the Mitchell Highway.**

Leaving the Great Western Highway (State Highway No. 5) at its western terminus in the City of Bathurst, 133 miles from Sydney, the Mitchell Highway descends the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range; traverses the undulating country of the central western district; and then crosses the great plains of the Western Division. En route it passes through Orange, Molong, Wellington, Dubbo, Narromine, Sir Richard Bourke, Governor of New South Wales, 1831-37.





Oxley Street, Bourke.

Trangie, Nyngan and Bourke, crossing the Bell, Macquarie, Bogan and Darling Rivers, and reaches the Queensland border at Barrington, 440 miles from its starting point at Bathurst. This route does not follow exactly that taken by the explorer, who as far as where Nyngan now stands, travelled to the west of the present route of the highway. His urgent need to find water caused him to then diverge and continue to the east of where the highway is now located.

#### Bathurst via Orange to Molong.

Between Bathurst and Molong the highway passes through undulating to hilly tableland country at a general elevation of from 2,000 to 3,000 feet above sea level. This is a relatively well watered area with an annual rainfall of more than 25 inches spread fairly uniformly throughout the year.

Over most of the area sheep raising and wool growing are the most important pastoral activities and following the establishment of improved pastures in recent years, the raising of fat lambs is developing over a fairly wide area. In the Orange district stone fruit growing is an important industry.

What is now the City of Orange was originally called Blackman's Swamp, by which name the town was known until 1846. As early as 1829, however, the name "Orange" was applied to the locality. In that year a Lands Office plan was issued on which the name "Orange" appeared as that of a parish and on which an un-named "village reserve" was marked.

In 1846 the Governor, Sir Charles Fitzroy, visited the town and remarked upon the beauty of the wattles which were everywhere in full flower. When asked to name the township he is reported to have said, "Call it Orange", so impressed was he by the magnificence and colour of the trees.

Another, and more feasible, account of the origin of the name is that Mitchell, in 1829, gave the name

to the locality in honour of the Prince of Orange with whom he had served as fellow aide-de-camp to the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular War.

Nothing certain is known concerning the origin of the name Blackman's Swamp, but it is believed to have some connection with the Blackman family, two of whom were among the first ten free settlers established at Bathurst in 1818 and one of whom—John Blackman—later became Chief Constable of that city. In 1817 Oxley had led a party, including John Blackman, on an exploration of the Lachlan River during which the area embraced by Orange is believed to have been traversed.

In 1845 a local agitation developed for the establishment of a village and Surveyor W. R. Richardson was directed to report upon the suitability of various sites that had been suggested for village purposes. Richardson recommended the site already shown as a village reserve on the plan of 1829 and on the 3rd November, 1846, executive approval was given to the establishment of a village under the name of Orange.

By about 1848 settlement in the Orange district had considerably extended but the discovery of gold at Ophir, about 17 miles from Orange, in 1851, speeded development and rapidly increased the population of the district.

An interesting link with Mitchell's last journey of exploration is to be found just off the Mitchell Highway about a mile and a half from Molong. It is a small enclosure containing a monument erected to the memory of an aborigine, Yuranigh, who accompanied Mitchell on his journey. In his report the Surveyor-General made various recommendations regarding the personnel of his expedition. Of Yuranigh he said, "Yuranigh was small and slender in person but he was of the most determined courage and resolution. His intelligence and his judgment rendered him so necessary to me that he was ever at my elbow, whether on foot or horse-

back. Confidence in him was never misplaced." The inscription on the monument erected over the grave reads: "To native courage, honesty and fidelity—Yuranigh, who accompanied the expedition of discovery into tropical Australia in 1846 lies buried here according to the rites of his countrymen, and this spot was dedicated and enclosed by the Governor-General's authority in 1852."

#### **Molong to Dubbo.**

Between Molong and Dubbo, the Mitchell Highway traverses gently undulating to undulating slopes country which falls from 1,700 feet above sea level at Molong to about 860 feet at Dubbo, passing through an area devoted principally to the production of wheat, wool and oats. The road follows the Bell River valley to its junction with the Macquarie River at Wellington and thence parallels the Macquarie to Dubbo.

In the course of a journey down the Lachlan River, which because of the interminable swamps and the inhospitable country, he had been compelled to abandon, Surveyor-General Oxley, on 19th August, 1817, entered a fertile and extensive valley of which he wrote in his journal as follows: "Imagination cannot fancy anything more picturesque than the scene which burst upon us, the breadth of the valley to the base of the opposite gently rising hills was between three and four miles, studded with fine trees upon a soil which, for richness, can no where be excelled . . ." In the centre of the valley "ran a strong and beautiful stream" which Oxley at first thought was the Macquarie River, but which, after finding that it actually joined the Macquarie, he named the Bell River, in compliment to Brevet Major Bell of the 48th Regiment. The valley was named by Oxley after the Duke of Wellington

whose recent victory at Waterloo had made him a national hero and the man most talked about throughout the British world.

With a view to affording convicts of the better disposed type an opportunity of rehabilitating themselves under more favourable conditions than obtained at penal establishments, the Government, in 1823, decided to establish an outpost in the Wellington Valley, to which it was proposed to transfer "specials", and with the labour so provided to open up the area for agriculture and grazing. Lieut. Percy Simpson was appointed Commandant of the outpost and he was instructed to proceed to the confluence of the Bell and Macquarie Rivers, taking cattle and sheep and "as much wheat as the teams could transport".

Simpson and his party with John Blackman, who has been earlier mentioned, as guide, set out from Bathurst in January, 1823, the route taken being approximately that now followed by the Orange-Wellington Road (Main Road No. 573). Simpson had been instructed, as soon as the expedition reached its destination, to put land under the plough and to sow it with the various species of seed wheat with which he had been supplied, "an equal trial to be given to each variety." This was probably the first experiment to discover the most suitable wheat for growing in Australia.

The plan for the reclamation of the prisoners did not prove successful and in 1831 the penal establishment was broken up and the settlement made use of as a Government stock station.

Several years later Mitchell, in the course of one of his journeys through the Wellington district, discovered some limestone caves which proved of great scientific



Burial place of Yuranigh, an aboriginal who accompanied Mitchell on his journey in 1846.

importance because of the fossil remains which were found. These caves are situated close to the route of the Mitchell Highway some six miles south of Wellington.

Between Wellington and Dubbo the Mitchell Highway runs closely parallel with the railway and for about five miles of its length it occupies an abandoned railway location.

One of the earliest settlers in the Dubbo district was Robert Vernour Dulhunty who took up land on the Macquarie River for grazing purposes. The land was located about four miles south of the present town of Dubbo, and in course of time became generally known as "Old Dubbo."

According to one account the district took its name, Dubbo, from that of the house built by Mr. Dulhunty and so named by him after an ancient aborigine whom he found camped on the site. Another account, by another member of the Dulhunty family, is that the natives thought the house resembled a man's hat, the native word for which sounded like Dubbo" and this was adopted as the name of the house. Yet another account, given in the Dulhunty Papers contained in the Mitchell Library, gives it that in the Wirradgeri language, that of the Wiradhuri tribe which formed the bulk of the aboriginal population of the district, the word "Dubbo", or one that sounded like it, meant "a head covering."

The present town was surveyed and laid out in 1849. It was granted incorporation in 1872 and was proclaimed a municipality in 1887.

#### **Dubbo to Bourke.**

From Dubbo through Narromine to Trangie the highway traverses level to gently undulating plains with diminishing rainfall. Narromine is situated in almost the geometrical centre of New South Wales.

North-westerly from Trangie the road passes out of the wheat belt into the wool growing and sheep breeding country of the Warren-Nyngan district. This

is an area of level plains lightly timbered and containing wide areas of heavy grey soils. Rainfall averages from 16 to 18 inches per annum.

At Nevertire, twenty miles north-westerly of Trangie, the Oxley Highway (State Highway No. 11), which links the coast with the New England tableland and the western plains, joins the Mitchell Highway, and at Nyngan, thirty-seven miles further on, the Barrier Highway (State Highway No. 8) leaves the Mitchell Highway for the South Australian border, 421 miles to the west via Cobar, Wilcannia and Broken Hill.

From Nyngan, the Mitchell Highway proceeds in a north-westerly direction to Bourke, passing into the Western Division of the State between Girilambone and Coolabah. Except for the Darling River flats approaching Bourke, the terrain is undulating through gravelly and sandy brown soils timbered with box, pine, ironwood, mulga and wilga. The rainfall in this area is between 13 and 16 inches per annum and the land is held in large properties devoted to wool growing.

Some doubt exists concerning the period during which settlement of the district around Bourke commenced. The evidence that as early as 1829 stockmen entered the area west of Brewarrina to the comparatively well watered country about the Narran, Bokhara and Culgoa Rivers, but the first official record relates to the issue, in 1941, of a licence to one William C. Mayne, to run cattle on the west side of the Barwon River. From then until about 1850, interest in the area increased and many applications for cattle runs west of the Upper Darling, to as far west as the Warrego River, were granted.

Bourke was the name originally given by Mitchell to a depot established by him in 1835. In that year Mitchell was leading an expedition down the Darling, following in the tracks of Sturt who had discovered and named the river in 1829. On the 27th May, 1835, Mitchell came to a spot on the river, about eight miles downstream from the present town of Bourke, which he declared to be an idea site for a future town. Being

**Travelling Stock near Mitchell Highway, Bourke District.**





Bridge over Darling River at Bourke.

hard pressed by the natives he erected a stockade to serve both as a depot and as a means of defence against attack and this he named Fort Bourke in honour of the Governor, Sir Richard Bourke.

The stockade proved to be unnecessary for defensive purposes and when, in 1861, a survey was made for the site of a township, that selected was the point at which Mitchell first reached the Darling. This spot had been called by Mitchell the "eighteen miles point." The native name was "Wortumurtie" meaning "high bank" but the name given by Mitchell for the stockade was adopted for the town which subsequently arose.

Nothing now remains of the stockade but a survey post now stands on the exact site of the stockade, and it has been proposed to build a cairn of stones to serve as a lasting record of Mitchell's association with the district.

#### **Bourke to the Queensland Border.**

Northerly from Bourke the Mitchell Highway passes over extensive plains adjoining the Warrego River to the Queensland border at Barrington. This is a sparsely settled area of relatively low rainfall, given over entirely to wool growing and beef cattle production on an extensive scale.

#### **Later Improvements on the Mitchell Highway.**

Since the establishment of the Department of Main Roads, and the adoption of the route of the Mitchell Highway, practically its entire length has been reconstructed by Councils and the Department from Main Roads funds. To-day, a continuous bituminous surface exists from Dubbo to Nyngan. Beyond Nyngan the road is gravelled to Bourke and thence to the Queensland border the road in the main is an earth formation, with gravelling on lengths difficult for the passage of traffic on wet weather. Beyond the Queensland border an important road leads to the towns of Cunnamulla and Charleville and thence into Central Queensland.

#### **Mitchell's View of the Future.**

Mitchell's journeys, particularly that which blazed the trail for the future Mitchell Highway, although not succeeding in their geographical aims, invariably opened up good pastoral country and thus contributed to the spread of settlement in much greater measure perhaps than did the journeys of his contemporaries.

Mitchell had an abiding faith in the future of Australia. In a preface to the first volume of his account of "Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia" he wrote (18th August, 1838):

"It (Australia) is a new and vast country, over the largest portion of which a veil of mystery still hangs; many of its productions vary in a singular manner from those in other parts of the world; within the memory of man one British Colony has risen there, in spite of adverse circumstances, to a high degree of prosperity; others have been founded, which promise to be equally successful; and it seems impossible to doubt that, at no distant period, the whole territory will be inhabited by a powerful people, speaking the English language, diffusing around them English civilisation and arts, and exercising a predominant influence over eastern Asia and the numerous and extensive islands in that quarter of the globe."

S.G.P.

#### **Acknowledgments.**

Material used in the preparation of this article has been obtained from—

The Mitchell Library, Sydney.

The Public Library, Sydney.

Journals of the Royal Australian Historical Society.

"Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor-General and Explorer"—J. H. L. Cumpston.

"Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia"—T. L. Mitchell.

"Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia"—Lt.-Col. Sir T. L. Mitchell.

This brochure is a reprint of one of a series of articles which were originally published in the Department's Journal "Main Roads". The reprints are made available for those people who wish to know the early history of our highway routes and thereby learn "the alphabet of our roads".