

Exploding the Lake Torrens horseshoe myth

Benjamin Herschel Babbage's map of Lake Gregory and Hermit Hill

Rod Tucker

I almost fell off my chair in the Baillieu Library Reading Room. While leafing through an 1858 South Australian parliamentary paper for a research project on the explorer Benjamin Herschel Babbage (1815–1878), I unexpectedly came across a hand-drawn map, folded up and loosely inserted between two pages. The map (see page 14) shows Babbage's route near two lakes in South Australia: Lake Gregory (today called Lake Eyre) and Lake Torrens. I quickly realised that this was an important, previously unrecorded, map. Babbage is known to have charted this area in 1858, but I had assumed that the original map was lost. To my amazement, there it was on the table in front of me.

Several South Australian parliamentary papers provide printed reports and lithographed maps relating to Babbage's 1858 expedition. The volume in which I found the map (SAPP 25/1858) covers the first part of the expedition, and a different parliamentary paper (SAPP 151/1858) relates to events near the end of the expedition.¹ The map is the hand-drawn original of a lithographed map (see page 16) in this second parliamentary paper, SAPP 151/1858. The Baillieu Library does not hold a copy of SAPP 151/1858.

This discovery raises three questions. Why was an original hand-drawn map inserted into a printed parliamentary paper? Given that the map records Babbage's route at the *end* of his expedition, why was it in a parliamentary paper that covers the first part of the expedition? Finally, how did the map come to the University of Melbourne?

The map is of historical interest for several reasons. Babbage carefully labelled the main geographical features and corrected spelling errors in some Aboriginal names. Importantly, he later made additional annotations commenting on the nature of country and observations from salient geographical features such as hills and the shore of Lake Gregory.

An inscription at the lower right-hand corner of the map provides a clue to its origin. The inscription 'R/221' in red ink refers to the 'rack plan' map numbering system used in the South Australian Surveyor General's Department in the mid-19th century. The department was protective of its maps and held most of its historical maps, like this one, until recent years.

Today, many of the department's maps reside in the State Records of South Australia. The Baillieu Library's accession register shows that this particular map came to the University of Melbourne with a group of other parliamentary papers in 1943, but there is no record in the register of who owned it previously. The previous owner presumably filed the map in SAPP 25/1858, either in error or because they also did not own a copy of SAPP 151/1858. The Baillieu's copy of SAPP 25/1858 includes a bookplate with the initials 'MMJ', but, despite the help of people knowledgeable in the antiquarian book trade, the identity of this person remains a mystery.

To find this important map was exciting enough. But as I studied it carefully, I realised that it provides new insights into a bitter dispute that raged in 1859 between Babbage and the governor of South Australia, Sir Richard MacDonnell. This dispute resulted in the Adelaide press vilifying Babbage and, despite his attempt to clear his name, the barrage against him left his reputation in tatters. My research is showing that much of this criticism of Babbage was unjustified. The map provides additional information to support this contention.

The story of Babbage's map begins with the explorer Edward John Eyre. On the first stage of his celebrated 1840–42 expedition, Eyre traversed a broad tract of country in the central east of South Australia. He travelled north from today's Port Augusta and followed the eastern shore of Lake Torrens, before turning further to the east into the northern Flinders Ranges. Eyre's exploratory work

UNIVERSITY
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29.00

Country by
which
passed

No hermit visible
by all lakes

Mr Major Warburton
Nov 5.

Lakes visited by Eyre

Warren's Creek
America Springs

Lake Gregory

S. Gaudet
Cattle

No lake
visited

Mount A. Hood's
Tracks

Lake Mackay

Hermit Hill

Small Salt
Lakes -
Hobbs's Camp

Hermit Range

Subsequent direction
of Eyre's Tracks

30.00

Warumpilanna

Warraperoona

Warramulla

Curdlawitja

Returned with party
under charge of Warburton
by way of Warramulla &
Anchorage

Yerra-Warra

Lake Pomona

Direction of Lake Pomona

Nuelly

Arcoona

Lake Orla
Andiamooka

31.00

Lake Campbell
Salt Springs

Small Springs
Mungo Springs

Smith's Walaboola

Ad. Salt Cr.

Bodie Hill

The Green color Manganese
found in camp

136 P. H. Warburton

137

R
221

Opposite: Benjamin Herschel Babbage, Untitled map, numbered *R/221*, hand-drawn in ink and watercolour on paper, backed with linen, 21 × 29 cm, loosely inserted into *Northern exploration: Reports &c., of explorations into the interior, by Messrs. Babbage, Warburton, Gebarty, and Parry*, South Australian Parliamentary Paper 25/1858, Adelaide: [Government Printer], 1858. UniM Bail SpC/AX f, 919.408 A938, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Below: John Arrowsmith, *Eastern portion of Australia*, London: John Arrowsmith, 1 May 1841, hand-coloured engraved map, 63 × 48 cm. UniM ERC MAPS MX 804 a 1841, Map Collection: Rare and Historic Maps, Eastern Resource Centre, University of Melbourne Library.

was a remarkable achievement, but he made a fundamental error, with ramifications that influenced further exploration of the north of South Australia for many years.

A series of salt lakes, including Lake Torrens, Kati Thanda Lake Eyre (North and South), Lake Gregory, Lake Blanche, Lake Callabonna and Lake Frome, encircles the Flinders Ranges. But Eyre incorrectly concluded that these were all part of one continuous lake, which he named Lake Torrens. Eyre reported that Lake Torrens formed a wide, horseshoe-shaped barrier of impassable, salt-encrusted mud that completely blocked travel further to the north. Eyre's creation of this mythical horseshoe-shaped lake cast an unnecessary pall over hopes in Adelaide for further northern exploration.

The mythical horseshoe Lake Torrens featured prominently on many Australian maps from 1840 to 1859. John Arrowsmith's map (right) is an example.² Eyre's horseshoe (shaded blue) dominates South Australia. Arrowsmith's map shows that by 1840 explorers had expanded white settlers' horizons in western New South Wales and to the south in 'Australia Felix', which later became Victoria. But settlers in the new colony of South Australia understandably felt hemmed in by Eyre's horseshoe-shaped Lake Torrens.

In 1858, 18 years after Eyre created the horseshoe myth, Babbage led a government-funded expedition to the north, travelling along the western side of the west wing of Eyre's horseshoe. Babbage's objective was to bypass the horseshoe and thereby find a route to the country beyond it. On his way north he found a gap in the horseshoe. From Hermit Hill, to the south of Kati Thanda Lake Eyre (South and North), which he named Lake Gregory,³ he showed conclusively that Lake Gregory is not part of Lake Torrens. A few months earlier, other explorers found a crossing on the eastern wing of the horseshoe. Now Babbage had identified a crossing on the western wing.



As his map shows, when he travelled to Hermit Hill he crossed the gap between the two lakes. He was the first European to make this crossing.

On Babbage's map, three arrows point to the east and south-east and a note points out that no lake is visible in that direction from Hermit Hill. I recently visited Hermit Hill and confirmed these observations and those in his written report. Compared with a modern map of the area, Babbage's map is remarkably accurate. The lithographed version in SAPP 151/1858 is a reasonable representation

Benjamin Herschel Babbage (cartographer); Surveyor General's Office, Adelaide (lithographer); *Rough sketch of country recently explored by Mr. B. H. Babbage*, from *Northern explorations: Reports from Messrs. Babbage and Warburton, and Police-Trooper Burt, on exploration into the north and north-western interior of South Australia*, South Australian Parliamentary Paper 151/1858, Adelaide: [Government Printer], 1858. Courtesy State Library of South Australia.

of the original. But the arrows indicating that no lake is visible to the east and south-east are much smaller. This change in the emphasis of the arrows had important implications.

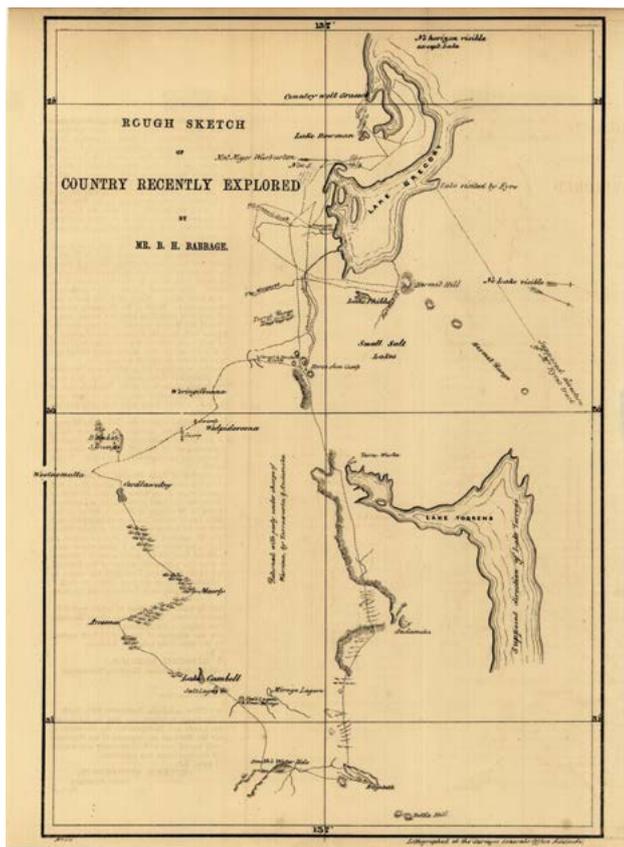
Babbage had political enemies in Adelaide. Unhappy with the speed of his exploration, the government replaced him with Major Peter Warburton, who was the chief commissioner of police and a friend of Richard

MacDonnell, and recalled Babbage to Adelaide. Warburton and MacDonnell conspired to deny Babbage any credit for discovering the gap between Lake Torrens and Lake Eyre. They accused Babbage of having never visited Hermit Hill. The *Adelaide Register*, which had a record of criticising Babbage, accused him of blunders and claimed that his arrows to the east and south-east were compass points pointing in the wrong direction. This, the *Register* argued, was clear evidence of Babbage's incompetence.⁴

My analysis of Babbage's map and written report shows that this claim is incorrect. Babbage made some mistakes, but the evidence is conclusive: he was the first European to verify that there is a gap between Lake Torrens and Lake Eyre. His map shows that he made an important contribution to exploding the Lake Torrens horseshoe myth.

The dispute between MacDonnell and Babbage provides an additional piece of information that may help to explain how the map came to the University of Melbourne. Soon after Babbage's return to Adelaide in 1858, several printers in Adelaide produced unofficial maps showing his discoveries around Lake Gregory.⁵ This incensed MacDonnell, who argued that any maps produced by the government should not include Babbage's discoveries.⁶ There would have been pressure on the Surveyor General's Department to divest itself of any evidence of Babbage's discoveries, and R/221 may have been given back to Babbage or one of his associates, who then took it or sent it to Melbourne.⁷

David Herrgott, the botanist on Babbage's 1858 expedition, moved to Melbourne in 1860 and may have taken the map with him. Herrgott was close to Ferdinand von Mueller, the Victorian government botanist and enthusiastic exponent of exploration. Mueller assembled an extensive private collection of documents relating to



land exploration in Australia. Herrgott and Mueller were planning to publish a book on exploration, including notes and sketches relating to Babbage's expedition and an original map.⁸ The book was never published, but this may have been the map that was planned for inclusion in the book. It could have found its way into Mueller's collection, or another private collection of documents relating to exploration, where it was inserted into the parliamentary paper. If Mueller owned it first, it could have passed into the hands of another private collector (MMJ) when he died, and from there to the Baillieu Library.

It may not be possible to definitively trace the provenance of this map. But even without this information, the map sheds new light on Babbage's expedition and his fights with his political enemies. It was a small gem waiting to be found, and I was lucky enough to stumble upon it.

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The Rare and Historic Maps Collection has more than 15,000 items, including some of the earliest cartographic works by European explorers of Australasia and other regions. See https://library.unimelb.edu.au/collections/map_collection/rare_and_historical_maps.

- 1 *Northern explorations: Reports from Messrs. Babbage and Warburton, and Police-Trooper Burt, on exploration into the north and north-western interior of South Australia*, South Australian Parliamentary Paper 151/1858, Adelaide: [Government Printer], 1858.
- 2 For more information on Arrowsmith, see Dorothy Prescott, 'The John Arrowsmith Australian Maps Project', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 12, June 2013, pp. 34–44.
- 3 Babbage thought that Lake Eyre (North) and Lake Eyre (South) were a single lake. Goyder later recognised that they are separated but joined by what is now called the Goyder Channel.
- 4 *Adelaide Register*, 'Lake Eyre', 27 January 1860, p. 2.
- 5 See, for example, *Adelaide Register*, 'The northern part of South Australia' (advertisement), 28 January 1859, p. 1.
- 6 J.W. Gregory, *The dead heart of Australia*, London: John Murray, 1906, p. 262.
- 7 The State Library of South Australia holds a different version of the map, which does not include the annotations on the map at the Baillieu. See Benjamin Herschel Babbage, *Plan of the country explored by Mr Babbage and Party between 27 September and 13 November 1858, R/78*, ink and watercolour on paper, 77.0 × 55.5 cm, State Library of South Australia.
- 8 *Argus* (Melbourne), Advertisement, 20 December 1860, p. 8.