



Henry Short, *Our Adopted Country. To the Memory of the Lamented Heroes of the Victorian Exploration 1861*, oil on canvas, 1861. Pictures Collection, H86.106

Henry Short, *Our Adopted Country.* *To the Memory of the Lamented Heroes of* *the Victorian Exploration 1861*

Pictures Collection H86.106

Acquired 1986

The Friends of State Library Victoria was instrumental in funding the purchase of this painting. There was a precedent for adding a Henry Short work to the Pictures Collection, as in 1861 Short had made a gift of his *Fish, Fruit and Flowers*, the first of his still lifes painted in Australia. It remained in the Library's collection until most of the artworks were transferred to the National Gallery of Victoria following the administrative separation of the two institutions in 1944.

The opportunity to acquire another Henry Short arose in 1986. This time it was a work of important historical interest concerning Burke and Wills' Victorian Exploring Expedition. In 1861, the bodily remains of missing explorers Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills had been recovered near Coopers Creek. They had succeeded in traversing the country from south to north but their return journey had been hazardous. By the time they had reached the halfway mark they were too ill and exhausted to continue their journey home, although their companion John King miraculously survived.

The expedition had caused great interest in Melbourne, and the news that Burke and Wills had died precipitated plans for the grand funeral that would be held in 1863. This may have been why Henry Short thought it appropriate to include in his painting a memorial urn decorated with images of the dead explorers.

The work impressed me. It is full of luscious fruit – ripe grapes, peaches and pineapple – and delicate English flowers flourish in front of the memorial urn. However these aspects of natural plenty seemed incongruous with the fate of the explorers and the thought of their final struggles, when they had insufficient sustenance and little prospect of being rescued alive.

I was president of the Friends when the painting became available, and I hoped that fellow committee members would agree that it should be purchased. Fortunately we were in accord, and raised the necessary finance through the support of the Helen M Schutt Trust (now the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust). We then had the painting reproduced on a Christmas card, encouraging Friends to send it out as a memento of the new acquisition.

Our Adopted Country is now on semipermanent display in the Cowen Gallery at the Library.