
Foundation Documents 1852-1883

The Overland Telegraph Line

In the late nineteenth century, Australia's communication links with the rest of the world hung by a slender, 3200-kilometre thread.

It was the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL), a single strand of galvanized wire that spanned the continent from north to south, linking all the colonies (except Western Australia) with each other, and Australia with the rest of the world.

The OTL was the greatest engineering feat undertaken in nineteenth-century Australia. Charles Todd (1826-1910) was in charge of the OTL project. He had arrived in London in 1855 to take up the post of Government Astronomer and Superintendent of Telegraphs in South Australia. Crossing then impenetrable and unexplored land, which just a decade before had claimed the lives of the explorers Burke and Wills, the line followed John McDouall Stuart's pioneering route through the centre of the continent, which in turn was guided by Indigenous trackways that lined permanent water sites.

With the completion of the line, which ran in Port Augusta in South Australia to Port Darwin, on the site of the present-day Darwin, messages that had once taken three months to reach London now took less than a day. (The line in Australia had 11 repeater stations, positioned about 200 kilometres apart. Staff at each station would receive a message, write it down, then retransmit it to the next station, and so on down the line.)

Work had begun on 15 September 1870, and the final join was made on 22 August 1872, eight months behind schedule. The project, funded entirely by the South Australian government, was divided into three sections: the southern section, from Port Augusta and 800 kilometres inland; the central section, which consisted of more than 950 kilometres of territory, then virtually unexplored by Europeans; and the section from Roper River, east of Katherine in the Northern Territory, to Port Darwin.

The first two sections were completed by 1872. The third, however, was to prove troublesome.

The diary of seventeen-year-old construction worker, W.A. Crowder (1854-1891), which begins on 21 November 1871, offers a first hand account of the second attempt to cover the difficult Roper River stretch. The first attempt had ended in disaster eight months earlier, in a hellish mix of torrential rain, impenetrable terrain, ferocious mosquitoes and a shortage of supplies. Fifty-six men went on strike and the private contractors were sacked. The second attempt saw a depot set up by the Roper River and supplies brought in by ship, rather than overland from Port Darwin. At one stage during the building of the OTL, the depot was the largest European settlement in the Northern Territory.

Time was at a premium; as the men struggled against the monsoons of the wet season and the threat of the heavy financial penalties, an undersea cable, Australia's external link to the world, was being brought ashore at Port Darwin.

Crowder's diary begins as he sails in the *Bengal* (ship) to the Roper River. The ship was crammed with extra men, bullocks and horses for the final push to pole and wire the 500-kilometre gap north of the river to Port Darwin. But bad weather still plagued the construction crew: about 500 millimetres of rain fell in December and January, and work could not resume until April.

Crowder's diary, kept in a small canvas pouch to protect it from the weather, begins neatly, written in ink in a clear hand. As conditions became more difficult, however, his writing becomes looser and some of the text is written in pencil. Although busy, he still found time to collect a list of words used by the Indigenous people of Roper River, along with samples of hakea leaves and flying fish wings. Crowder's diary is filled with references to air thick with mosquitoes, to rising rivers and seas of mud.

At work on the line after the wet season had ended, Crowder detailed further difficulties: 'wattle scrub which is beastly stuff to run a line through' and stumps awfully bad. After the OTL had been completed, Crowder and many of his fellow workers returned to Adelaide to take part in a series of celebrations, including a procession through the city and a banquet at the Town Hall.

The OTL transformed central Australia. It opened up the Northern Territory to graziers and prospectors and was responsible for the development of towns such as Alice Springs, named for Charles Todd's wife.

Reading

[*National treasures from Australia's great libraries*](#) Canberra : National Library of Australia, 2005, pp. 96-97