

1872

AUSTRALIA ON THE LINE

At 10 minutes past noon on 22 August 1872, at a now forgotten spot in the burning emptiness Surrounding Frew's Ironstone Ponds, south of Darwin, a small group of men joined two strands of wire before bursting into loud cheers, firing twenty-one revolver shots into the air, and smashing a brandy bottle filled with cold tea against a newly-planted telegraph pole.

This strange celebration marked the completion of one of the most audacious projects in Australian history — the construction of an overland telegraph line across 3175 kilometres of some of the world's most desolate terrain to link Adelaide with Palmerston, as Darwin was then known.

Exactly two months later the first Morse code messages were exchanged between Adelaide and London via an undersea cable joined to the overland telegraph line at Palmerston.

For Charles Todd, South Australia's forty-five-year-old Postmaster-General and the driving force behind the project, it was a moment of triumph. Finally, as he put it, 'the Australian colonies were connected with the grand electric

chain which unites all the nations of the earth’.

One telegram, sent by Queen Victoria from Windsor Castle, was addressed to Todd, appointing him Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George.

In 1854, barely ten years after the world’s first electric telegraph had been put to public use in the United States, a line was opened between Melbourne and nearby Williamstown.

Within seven years a whole network of single-wire telegraph lines linked cities and towns in all the colonies, except Western Australia. Even Bass Strait was breached by a submarine cable laid from Melbourne to Launceston in 1859.

Yet the biggest challenge remained: to link Australia by telegraph with Britain and the rest of the world. Several schemes were proposed, but by 1870 South Australia and Queensland, the latter backed by New South Wales, were left negotiating with the British-Australian Telegraph Company.

The company proposed laying a submarine cable from Java, which was already connected with Europe, to the north coast of Australia, and there to join a transcontinental line to be built by one of the two colonies.

It was John McDouall Stuart’s epic crossing a few years’ earlier that clinched the deal for South Australia. Not only had he blazed a trail along which the line could be constructed, but as a result of his pioneering effort the colony had gained control in 1863 of the present-day Northern Territory and had founded a settlement at Palmerston, much closer to Java than any part of Queensland.

So, in June 1870, a contract was signed under which South Australia agreed to complete the overland telegraph line within eighteen months, with any delay liable to heavy financial penalties.

The other colonies refused to assist the project financially, so the South Australian Parliament voted to spend £120 000 — one quarter of the eventual cost — and placed the project in the hands of Charles Todd.

Born in London on 7 July 1826, Todd trained in astronomy at the Greenwich Royal Observatory and worked as assistant astronomer at Cambridge before coming to South Australia in 1855 as Government Observer (astronomer) and Superintendent of Telegraphs — a strange combination of duties but one to which the versatile young man soon adapted.

He developed the colony's telegraph network from scratch, and was so successful that, in 1870, he was appointed Postmaster-General.

For the overland project Todd divided the route into three sections — southern, central, and northern — and appointed private contractors to handle those nearest the coast.

The central section — stretching for 1000 kilometres from the Macumba River to Tennant Creek and considered the most difficult — was put in the hands of five government teams, totalling 100 men with horses, bullocks, and camels, the latter to bring in provisions from Port Augusta at the top of Spencer Gulf.

Work started simultaneously in all three sections, and by December 1871 the southern and central lines were joined. But in the north the wet season

bogged down work after only about 360 of its 1017 kilometres of line had been strung south from Palmerston.

The private contractors were dismissed, and a government team of over 200 men rushed in under the command of a railway engineer, R. C. Patterson. Todd arrived with more men in January 1872 — already past the deadline — but heavy rains continued to hold up work.

In Palmerston, meanwhile, the under-sea cable-laying operation had begun on 7 November 1871, ‘The scene was a most animated one’, recorded one observer:

...the men singing at their work, the officers waving flags, and the inhabitants of the settlement looking on. About nine a.m. the end [of the cable] was landed, carried up a shallow trench on the beach to an iron hut just above high-water mark, and the end joined on to the electrical apparatus all ready... The Hibernia instantly commenced paying out, the Edinburgh immediately steamed after her, and the laying of the Australian cable was fairly commenced, the whole proceedings being carried out with the greatest simplicity imaginable...

On the 16th a telegram came through, stating that the expedition had arrived within six miles of Banjoewangi...

On the 20th they spoke again, and Captain Halpin announced from Java that the cable was complete and in perfect condition, and that telegraphic communication was established between Australia, the mother country, and the western world.

On the mainland, however, the line was still 421 kilometres away from Tennant Creek by June 1872. Soon the British-Australian Telegraph Company was demanding compensation.

Instead, a mounted courier service was introduced to bridge the gap, and on 23 June the first telegrams were transmitted from England, reaching the various colonial capitals via Adelaide on 2 July.

Fortunately for Todd and his government, the submarine cable broke the following day, and was not repaired until two months after the last of the 36 000 poles carrying the overland telegraph line had been planted.

Charles Todd continued to pioneer new lines of communication, including the construction of the telegraph link between Adelaide to Eucla, a repeater station town now buried under the sands of the harsh Nullarbor Plain, where it joined the line from Perth in 1877 to link the continent from east to west.

Knighted sixteen years later, Sir Charles Todd died near Adelaide on 29 January 1910.

By then a second line had been strung on the posts which pass through the centre of Australia and where a town, Alice Springs, named after his wife, and the Todd River, still honour the memory of the man who played such a great part in bringing the world to our doorstep.