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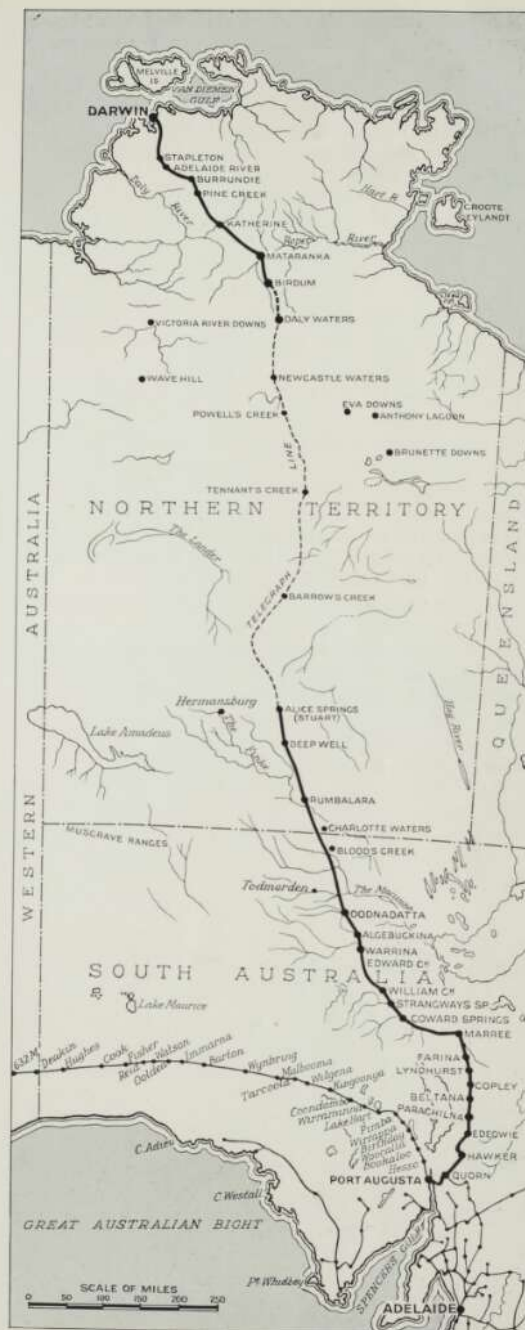
The Overland Telegraph Line

By A. B. HAINES

FOLLOWING the route that was traversed by John McDouall Stuart in his successful explorations through the interior to the north coast of Australia, the Overland Telegraph Line stretches for over two thousand miles from Adelaide to Darwin. By far the greater part of the route is very sparsely settled, and, keeping always to the way where inspection and maintenance are most easily effected, the line goes on across almost unoccupied gibber plains; over the shifting sandhills of the desert; by stony, flat-topped hills that rise abruptly from the spinifex; through gaps in the wild MacDonnell Ranges; straight ahead through mile upon mile of stunted mulga scrub, near the base of Central Mount Stuart; and, lastly, through the northern tropical forest.

Every traveller who has gone this way has had the interminable line of poles as an unfailing guide through the vast stretches of unfenced country, where unmade tracks, leading off to station or bore, are indistinguishable from the unmade main road. Sometimes, indeed, the former may show more signs of traffic. Across the plains the long perspective of poles dwindles into nothing in the heat haze; and sometimes poles, so far away that they could not be visible in normal circumstances, seem to hang in the sky with no visible connection with the earth beneath, refracted by the mirage. Through the scrublands and the forest, the chain-wide clearing for the line goes on and on to a distant tiny gap that never seems to come any closer, until at last there is a sudden end, a wide burst of sunlight, when the line suddenly enters upon a short stretch of open, grassy country. Across the high grass of the plain there is always a dark wall of timber, and always the poles lead straight on towards the notch of another chain-wide avenue. The road now runs on this side of the poles, now on that, and sometimes makes a serpentine track as it winds in and out from one side of the line to the other. By pile of rocks, by gidyea clump, across dry creeks and sandy river-beds that become raging torrents in the wet season, through Alice Springs, along the dusty main street of Tennant's Creek, through Newcastle Waters, Daly Waters, and Birdum, and then beside the railway line, passing gigantic ant-hills at Pine Creek and palm-bordered flat at Rum Jungle, through bamboo clump where cattle rest in the shade, beside forest stream whose quiet surface is covered with water-lilies, by shallow lagoon where water fowl rest in their myriads, and by tropical jungle scrub, the Overland Telegraph Line comes at last to the old stone building whose windows look out across the wide blue harbour of Darwin.

Myall blacks have stolen the insulators to chip into spear-heads, and white men, at the last extremity from thirst, have cut the wire to bring the linesmen to the rescue. The "O.T.," as all northerners call the line, has entered, too, into the story of exploration. In 1878, Nathaniel Buchanan, overlanding cattle from Queensland to Glencoe Station in the Territory, a journey of over 1,000 miles though then unknown and unsettled country, after constant attacks by hostile blacks and losses of cattle by crocodiles, was at last obliged to push ahead and obtain stores from the Katherine Telegraph Station for his party, which he had



FROM ADELAIDE TO ALICE SPRINGS AND FROM BIRDUM TO DARWIN THE TELEGRAPH LINE FOLLOWS FAIRLY CLOSELY THE RAILWAY.

left 300 miles behind. Thanks to this help, he was able to complete his remarkable journey and to deliver the cattle at Glencoe. In 1879, Ernest Favenc, exploring the route of a proposed railway from Brisbane to Darwin, encountered a terribly dry stage of ninety miles between Cresswell Creek and the O.T. After an exceedingly hard journey, during which he lost three horses from exhaustion, he at last reached safety at the Powell's Creek Telegraph Station. Again, in 1879, Alexander Forrest and his party, who were exploring the country between De Grey station in north-west Australia and Darwin, became desperately short of food. Leaving two men in a depot camp, Forrest and the rest of the party pushed on in an endeavour to reach the O.T. Almost at the last extremity from thirst and lack of food, and travelling at night to avoid the terrific heat of the day, they, however, managed to reach the line, and came upon the camp of a line-repairing party in time to save their own lives, and to obtain relief for the two left at the depot camp.

AT the time when construction of the Overland Telegraph Line was undertaken, Darwin, and the whole of the Northern Territory, and Central Australia, were included within the boundaries of the State of South Australia, and the first settlers of that State had arrived only thirty-six years before. In 1870 an agreement was reached between the South Australian Government and the British-Australia Telegraph Company, in which the latter Corporation undertook to lay a cable from Java to Australia,



CHARLES TODD (ABOUT 1871).



OVERLAND TELEGRAPH PARTY, 1872 (left to right):
J. A. G. LITTLE, E. C. PATTERSON, CHARLES TODD,
and A. J. MITCHELL.

providing South Australia constructed a land line across Australia linking Adelaide and Darwin, and stipulating that the land line was to be ready for use by the beginning of 1872. A Bill was introduced by the Government authorizing a preliminary loan of £120,000 to commence construction, and it was decided to divide the work into three sections, the "end" sections to be constructed by private contract and the most difficult, the central section, by the Government.

As the only information possessed of the country was that supplied by the explorer, John McDouall Stuart, Mr. Charles Todd, the Postmaster-General and Superintendent of Telegraphs, felt the necessity of fitting out and dispatching an exploratory expedition in advance of the construction parties. The command of this expedition was given to John Ross. Ross left Adelaide in July, 1870, with instructions to proceed as far as the centre of the continent, following generally Stuart's tracks. He was then to return and meet the construction parties, or Mr. Todd, with full information as to the nature of the country, the supply of timber, the location of water supplies, and to advise as to the best course the line should take. Favourable spots for crossing creeks and watercourses were to be noted, as well as suitable sites for stations and depots, at distances of about 150 to 200 miles apart. To map the route, a surveyor was attached to the party, which also included three men selected by Ross. Ten saddle-horses, twelve pack-horses, and rations for the party were obtained at Beltana, where the necessary saddlery, hobbles, and general equipment, together with arms and ammunition, had already been forwarded by the Government. Meat was obtained at Mount Margaret.

TO this day one may meet drovers' outfits similarly equipped along the route of the O.T. The horsemen carry quart-pot and saddle-pouch attached to the saddle "D's," and a water-bag hangs from a strap about the horse's neck. The long line of pack-horses threads its way through the scrub with a jingle of hobble-chains and tinkle of the horse bells, both of which hang from their necks. Great leather bags containing rations and cooking utensils, or metal water-canteens shaped to the curve of a horse's ribs, hang on each side of the pack-saddles, while bulging canvas- or calico-covered bundles of camp equipment are roped on the saddles of others. There are no hostile blacks on

the line in these days but, with one of these drovers' outfits in the mind's eye, it is easy to picture Ross and his party, rifle across saddle-bow in case of an encounter, winding through the gidyea and mulga, or strung out in a long line as they picked their way amongst the stones of the sunbaked gibber plains, or threaded through the shifting dunes of red, sandy, desert country. Here I may say the exploring party carried out the survey without misadventure and duly returned with the information required.

In the meantime the work of construction had been divided into three sections, viz.:

1st.—From Port Augusta, 500 miles northwards, to about latitude 27° .

2nd.—From latitude 27° to $19^{\circ}31'$.

3rd.—From latitude $19^{\circ}30'$ to Darwin (639 miles).

Tenders were called for erecting the first and third sections, and contracts were let to E. M. Bagot for the first section at £41 per mile, and for the third section to Messrs. Darwent and Dalwood at prices ranging from £39 to £92 per mile for various sub-sections, the prices increasing with the distance from their base at Darwin. The Government, in each case, provided wire and insulators, and about 1,500 iron poles were supplied to Bagot for use in the treeless country and gibber fields north of Strangway's Springs.

THE central section, to be constructed by the Government, was divided into five sub-sections, and three of the working parties left Adelaide on the 29th of August and two parties on the 5th of September. The outfitting of the parties had been the matter

of grave concern, as even the best of men must have failed without adequate and suitable equipment in such surroundings, where water was scarce and every single thing required had to be carted for such prodigious distances through entirely unsettled, almost unknown country, and in the face of hostile tribes. It was necessary, above all things, that the parties should have reliable and sufficient transport, the best available at the time—thoroughly staunch horses and good bullocks. Finally, the parties were supplied with fifteen horse-wagons, seventeen bullock-drays and one bullock-wagon, and five "express" wagons; in all 165 horses and 210 bullocks. A sixth small party was also fitted out to take charge of a receiving and forwarding depot on the Finke, close to the southern border of the region now known as Central Australia, and this party took 2,000 sheep, which would not improve its daily rate of travel. Six miles a day is fair travelling for sheep. The bullock-drays would do rather more than twice that distance. There would be heavy going for the wagons in the sand: the gibber plains would give the bullocks sore feet and would wear the shoes of the horses so that they would require more frequent renewal; and crossing-places on creeks and rivers would have to be searched for, perhaps banks cut down, and heavy going in the beds partly "corduroyed" with logs and branches to avoid too long a detour. It will give some idea of the difficulties to be overcome, and the distance and rate of travel, when it is stated that the fifth party, working on the sub-section farthest north (from latitude 21° to $19^{\circ}30'$), after leaving Adelaide on the 5th of September, did not reach the scene of their operations until the 24th of May in the following



THE "OMEO" AND THE "BENGAL" WITH THE TUG "YOUNG AUSTRALIA" AT THE ROPER RIVER DEPOT.

year, the first pole on that section not being planted until 1st June.

Bagot commenced his work on the first section about the end of September. Owing to the difficulties arising from the absence of timber suitable for poles over more than 300 miles, this section was not finally completed until the end of March, 1872: but, by allowing the contractor to put in at first only ten poles to the mile (i.e., every alternate pole) on the treeless northern end of the section, the whole of the wire was suspended and joined on to the central section by the beginning of January.

Messrs. Darwent and Dalwood's northern contract broke down, principally owing to lack of transport power, after about 225 miles of poles and 156 miles of wire had been erected. A fresh expedition was at once organized under the command of R. C. Patterson, the Assistant Engineer-in-Chief, who left Melbourne for Darwin in the *Omeo* in August, 1871, followed by a fleet of vessels (*Himalaya*, *Golden Fleece*, *Laju* and *Antipodes*), conveying 170 horses and 500 bullocks.

MR. TODD, who was no arm-chair director of operations, went as far north as Peake Station (lat. 28° 4') early in October, 1870, in order to complete the organization of the central parties. He encountered Ross, on his return from his first trip, at Strangway's Springs, and from Peake Station, on the 18th of November, Ross was sent out for a second time to explore the country north of Central Mount Stuart. After this had been accomplished, he returned and met the construction parties at the junction of the Hugh and Finke rivers, where he was again fitted out to go north and effect communication with the Northern Territory party. In this last trip, Ross crossed the continent to Darwin, where he arrived in August, 1871, and returned by sea to Adelaide by the *Omeo*.



BARROW'S CREEK TELEGRAPH STATION, ABOUT
MIDWAY BETWEEN ALICE SPRINGS AND
TENNANT'S CREEK.

The construction had gone well in the central section, and the wire was suspended to the northern point aimed at as early as December, 1871, a distance of 626 miles, and the most inaccessible portion of the work undertaken. On Bagot's contract the wire was up by the beginning of January, so that, but for the collapse of Messrs. Darwent and Dalwood's expedition, the line would have been through to Darwin in January, 1872, and, as the cable was laid, communication would then have been established with England.

In spite of the large force and increased transport power placed at the disposal of the new expedition to the Darwin end of the line, fresh trouble was in store for this section. The expedition arrived during the dry and hot months immediately preceding the setting-in of the north-west monsoon. The country was bare of feed, and long stages had to be travelled without water through the arid ridges of the open tropical forest. Before wells could be sunk and all material carted up to the end of the line completed by the former contractors, a wet season of remarkable intensity was upon them, and all work was stopped. In a normal Northern Territory "wet," all transport, except by pack-horse, comes to a sudden end, and now Patterson's party sustained severe losses of live-stock, from thirty to forty per cent. of the bullocks perishing. Patterson, after dispatching the *Bengal* with stores and material to the Roper River, made his way there with difficulty across boggy or flooded country, and from the river he sent a message by boat to Normanton, and thence to the Gilbert River, the nearest telegraph station in Queensland, whence a wire was sent asking for further help.

All anxiety with respect to the work of the southern and central sections being at an end, it was decided that Mr. Todd should go to Patterson's assistance. He accordingly left for the Roper in the *Omeo* on the 3rd of January with eighty horses, and was followed by the *Tararua* with another seventy-seven horses. As it was expected that neither the *Omeo* nor the *Tararua* would be able to navigate the Roper, a small paddle-steamer, the *Young Australian*, was purchased and dispatched to meet Mr. Todd at the mouth of the river. However, while the party was still awaiting the arrival of this little steamer, and, after ascertaining that there was a sufficient depth of water on the bar at high tide, the *Omeo* was cautiously taken about fifty miles up the river on a voyage of several days at the slow and careful rate at which they negotiated the bends and rocky bars that rendered the stream dangerous for a vessel of *Omeo's* tonnage. The captain had indeed refused to risk his ship until Mr. Todd had signed a bond making the Government responsible for the value, but the horses were safely landed at a spot known as Three Island Reach. On arrival of the *Young Australian*, cargo was transhipped into her for the depot, a distance of ninety miles upstream from the river-mouth. The lightened *Omeo* was then towed up to discharge the rest of her loading, and a fine freshet in the river enabled the *Tararua* to reach the same spot and to land her horses and cargo without accident. The empty vessels had no difficulty in reaching the sea again.

The protracted wet season kept the party at the Roper depot for some weeks; and as it was feared that the working parties near Daly Waters would be out of provisions, a supply was sent them by a team of fifty pack-horses. Patterson followed almost immediately; and, ultimately, as soon as the country became passable, all the teams were got away with full loads.



A TELEGRAPH LINESMAN ON PATROL IN NORTH QUEENSLAND.

GOVERNMENT parties, having completed their work on the central section, had commenced working north from the terminal point of their original share of the construction. At the beginning of July, 1872, communication between Adelaide and Tennant's Creek was established, while, at the northern end, Darwin had been linked with Daly Waters, a weekly horse-express bridging the gap between Tennant's Creek and Daly Waters, a distance of 270 miles, chiefly through tropical forest or scrublands. But the construction work was pushed on vigorously, and the wire went up on the poles mile after mile, communication with Adelaide on one side and with Darwin on the other being maintained. The clearing of a chain-wide track for the line through hundreds of miles of timber is in itself a great task, while the sinking of four-foot holes for the posts in the hard and stony ground is heavy work in that country and that climate. During the heat of the day crowbars would be almost too hot to touch, even when in constant use. When left lying in the sun for any length of time, they would have to be rolled in the dirt with a toe before they could be handled. Doubtless, too, the bottoms of many holes would have to be soaked with water before they could be sunk to the required depth. The gap gradually closed until the two ends of the wire were joined together on the 22nd of August, 1872, and communication was established across Australia, a distance of rather more than 2,000 miles, following the course that the line takes.

Thus the great work, carried out in country uninhabited except for hostile natives, was successfully accomplished within two years in spite of the many difficulties, mishaps, and hardships. When the ends of the line were finally joined together, Mr. Todd was

in camp near Central Mount Stuart, where he received congratulatory messages from all parts of the colonies.

In addition to the construction of the line, up to this time, the working parties had also built substantial stone stations of eight or nine rooms at the Peake, Charlotte Waters, Alice Springs, and Barrow's Creek, huts of three rooms at Tennant's Creek, Powell's Creek, and Yam Creek, and a log hut of six rooms at Daly Waters; a similar building was in course of erection at the Katherine; and at Darwin they had erected a large stone building with two wings for the accommodation of the cable staff as well as the Post and Telegraph officials. One of the rooms was used as a billiard-room, the company having provided their officers with a good billiard-table in addition to a well-stocked library.

The work throughout was of the most substantial character; but white ants, especially on the section north of Tennant's Creek, are very numerous and destructive to all timber-work, except where cypress pine is used. It was therefore considered advisable that the wooden poles on the line, from about twenty miles north of Daly Waters to Tennant's Creek, should be replaced with iron poles while the horse and bullock teams were still in the country. This work was carried out in 1873 with the aid of the plant left at the Roper landing, a total of 33 wagons and 17 drays, together with 174 horses and 325 bullocks.

In conclusion, I may add that the shore-end of the cable from Java to Darwin was landed in November, 1871. The cable, however, broke down on the 25th of June, 1872, and communication with the outside world was not restored until the 21st of October. On the 15th of November, banquets were held in Adelaide, Sydney, and London to celebrate the event.