

ALICE SPRINGS

From singing wire to iconic outback town

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Wakefield
Press

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Prologue

The voyage of the *Atalanta*

There was mist about and not much wind this Sunday morning 8 April 1866 as the *Atalanta* approached Port Adelaide.¹ Edward Allchurch had been on deck from an early hour. The 37-year-old policeman from Brighton in Sussex opened a hatch to get air into his family's stuffy and cramped living quarters, then rang the bell to advise passengers of the morning church service. Hopefully this would be their last day on board. Ten weeks had passed since the three-masted sailing ship left England with 394 immigrants on board. Five days earlier, off the coast of Western Australia, seaman Thomas Moore had fallen overboard while working on the forecastle. The loss had cast gloom over the ship.

It had not been an easy trip for Edward Allchurch. His wife Anne was seven months pregnant when they set sail from Plymouth on 23 January and was sick for much of the journey. Edward had his hands full keeping an eye on their three young children Harry, Emily and Annie. He was also one of the ship's constables and frequently on duty checking the passengers kept the ship clean, and young single men were away from the young single women. Many were seasick and the ship's doctor had his hands full.

The Suez Canal was not yet open so their route to Australia took them around the bottom of Africa and across the Indian Ocean. Excavation work began in April 1859 but wasn't completed until November 1869. Anne gave birth to a daughter in the early hours of Saturday 10 March with the ship near the Cape of Good Hope. Edward told Captain John Ballingall, 'It's a great fat girl with dark hair,' and asked for the latitude and longitude. The child was named Atalanta Hope Allchurch, later shortened to Attie.²

As she was taking her first breath, her sisters Emily and little Annie were beginning to wheeze. Whooping cough had broken out on the ship. Edward wrote in his diary three days later: 'A poor little child died last night ... I thought they would be sure to read over [it] but not so they opened the cabin

windows and threw it out.' It was the seventh to die during the voyage. A couple of weeks before the ship finally berthed at Port Adelaide, everyone started to itch. Edward penned: 'This morning the subject is all about lice, to use plain language we are all getting lousy, try all we can to prevent it.'

Among his fellow emigrants was William Whitfield Mills, a 21-year-old from Devon, who'd set off for South Australia seeking opportunity and adventure. Edward and Anne Allchurch didn't know it then but this young man and their newborn daughter would achieve fame in the heart of Australia. Mills would discover a large waterhole in 1871 and call it the Alice Spring, after the wife of his boss, Postmaster-General Charles Todd. Alice Todd never visited the place and her husband only saw it once. Attie Allchurch was destined to live there in the early 1900s with children of her own.

Edward, Anne and young William Mills had no idea what the future held when they finally walked down the gangplank at Port Adelaide docks. They could write to their relatives on the other side of the globe, telling them of their new life, but would have to wait six months for a reply. There was talk of laying a communication cable, across the seafloor from England to Australia, but there were technical hitches and the British Government wasn't willing to cough up the cash to make it happen.

The colony of South Australia had been established in 1836, founded on ideas proposed by Edward Gibbon Wakefield. He suggested the British Government sell land at a reasonable price to encourage free settlers. The government could then use the money generated to bring more settlers. There was no need to employ convicts. Colonel William Light was appointed the colony's first surveyor-general and came up with a bold and imaginative plan for the colony's capital. He chose a site by the River Torrens, some distance inland of its port, and laid out a grid of streets encircled by parks and greenery. It was named after Queen Adelaide, the wife of King William IV. The population had grown to 30,000 by the time the *Atalanta* tied up at the wharf in 1866 and plans were in place to illuminate Light's city with gas streetlights.

Edward Allchurch was offered work as a policeman and served in the

city for 18 months. In 1868 he took charge of the police station at Glenelg and three more sons and another daughter were born there. He remained by the sea for the rest of his life, becoming one of the area's best known and respected residents. He died at the age of 88 in April 1917.

In October 1871, when his daughter Attie was five years old, three British ships sailed into Port Darwin on the other side of the continent, and dropped their anchors into the warm waters lapping Australia's north coast. They'd come to lay the last leg of the long-awaited submarine communication cable from England. The South Australian Government was stringing a wire across the continent to connect Adelaide to it. This wire became known as the overland telegraph line, or simply the OT.

Attie Allchurch married telegraph operator Thomas Andrew Bradshaw in April 1890. Nine years later, she bravely followed him into the great Australian nothingness with her young children after her husband had been appointed post and stationmaster at the Alice Springs telegraph station.

In the 1960s their eldest daughter Doris worked with journalist Douglas Lockwood on *Alice on the Line*, a bestselling book about the family's life on the OT line between 1899 and 1908. Cattleman Bryan Bowman went to central Australia in 1921 and wrote a few books of his own. He said:

The theme song of the old North Road and the OT line was the hum of the wires. You were seldom out of earshot of it whether riding along the road, staying at a bush pub or just camping somewhere along the road. It was at its peak on a still night when it could be heard half a mile from the Line. Some people didn't like it but to me it was romantic music and gave me a feeling of not being entirely isolated from the outside world and one could speculate on what messages of hope or tragedy the wires were carrying between Europe and Australia.³

Most of the singing wire has now gone, pulled down in the 1980s, although travellers to the outback can still find stretches of sagging wire and iron poles. Building that line was one of the most significant events in the nation's history. However, the Australian Government saw no need to preserve it once it was superseded by new technology.

1

Connecting Australia to the world

Adelaide's survey yard was a hive of activity on Monday morning 5 September 1870 when William Mills turned up at 7.30 with more than 40 others. He was now an experienced surveyor, having joined the South Australian colonial service two months after arriving. He and the other men assembled near the River Torrens that morning were heading north to build the central section of the government's overland telegraph line. A larger party of 65 men had left the previous Monday. Charles Todd, the cheerful Postmaster-General and Superintendent of Telegraphs, took the 9 am rollcall and farewelled the second contingent. He urged them to keep clear of pubs on their way to Port Augusta. Governor Sir James Fergusson said they all looked like men of business and their success would be heard from one end of the world to the other if they completed the work within the time allotted.¹

William Mills had worked with the survey party that finally established a settlement on Australia's north coast. The local Aboriginal people had lived in harmony with the uncompromising tropical environment for thousands of years but white settlers who went there with high hopes in 1824, 1827, 1838 and 1864 found the top end of Australia a land of failure. It exhausted and overwhelmed them. This didn't deter South Australia's energetic Surveyor-General George Woodroffe Goyder. Mills was one of the men who landed at Port Darwin with him on 5 February 1869 to carve civilisation from the termite-ridden woodland.

Adelaide politician Henry Bull Templar Strangways was the driving force behind this latest attempt at colonisation. Three months earlier, on 3 November 1868, he'd assumed the position of chief secretary and with it leadership of South Australia's colonial government. His predecessor John Hart tried introducing the term premier in 1866, but it was a controversial issue.² Strangways proved a forceful and influential figure, though his term in office was brief.

South Australia had pushed hard to gain control of the big chunk of the continent north of the 26th parallel of latitude and the Colonial Office in London eventually agreed. It transferred administration from Sydney to Adelaide in 1863, having rejected the idea in 1861 when it granted another strip of land to South Australia. The Western Territory lay between South Australia's western boundary, then set as longitude 132°, and Western Australia's border at longitude 129°. It belonged to New South Wales but the politicians in Sydney were happy to unload it.³ The South Australians had high hopes their new Northern Territory would reap rich rewards but little happened in the years between 1863 and 1868.

Strangways was determined to finally make progress and figured his surveyor-general was the man for the job. Goyder left Port Adelaide on 23 December 1868 aboard the chartered barque *Moonta* with a survey party of 134 men and an impressive entourage of horses, working bullocks, sheep and goats. They toiled for seven months in the oppressive heat and humidity, plagued night after night by mosquitoes and sandflies. All told, they surveyed more than 2700 square kilometres of land, including a main town located inside the large natural harbour that John Lort Stokes of the British survey ship HMS *Beagle* named Port Darwin on 9 September 1839.⁴ Goyder's town plan featured half-acre blocks and wide streets named after the surveyors and workmen themselves, rather than English royalty or politicians. His surveyors also planned three smaller townships. Two of them were sited on rivers running into Port Darwin and the third was cut out of the bush 150 kilometres inland, near Freds Pass in the Daly Range. Goyder envisaged the road to Freds Pass as the main highway to the interior of the continent.⁵ His job done, he returned to Adelaide at the end of September 1869 on the

government's schooner *Gulnare*, along with 29 of his party. The majority of the men, including William Mills, remained until early in the New Year.⁶

Many of the other men assembling in the survey yard in September 1870 had been in the north with George Goyder. Like Mills, they'd jumped at the opportunity to head off on another adventure, this time to the heart of the continent. The South Australian Government had given Charles Todd the daunting task of stringing a galvanised-iron wire across the continent from Port Augusta to Port Darwin. He only had 16 months to plant 36,000 telegraph poles and build a dozen repeater stations at approximately 250-kilometre intervals. His political masters had cut a bold and risky deal with the British–Australian Telegraph Company, which was laying the last leg of a submarine cable from England to Australia's north coast. There were those in the east who doubted the plucky South Australians could pull it off. Queenslanders were more savage in their criticism. They were miffed because the company had reneged on an understanding to connect the cable to their fledgling telegraph network.

Todd's overland telegraph line was the country's first big development project – but not a national effort. Australia was an assortment of self-governing colonies in 1870, rather than one nation. South Australia and Queensland, the two youngest colonies, had competed for the right to risk a fortune of their citizens' money on new but vulnerable technology. The South Australians prevailed, but only at the very last minute, with a move that enraged their rivals.

It would be possible to exchange messages between England and Australia's colonial capitals in just a couple of hours if Todd could succeed despite the considerable odds stacked against him. Telegraph wires already linked Adelaide with Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, and a submarine cable had been laid on the bed of Bass Strait from Melbourne to Launceston where it joined the telegraph line to Hobart.

The new marvel of telegraphy

The telegraph and railways were to the 19th century what internet and air travel are to the 21st century, providing unprecedented rapid communication

and transport. The American Samuel Morse had revolutionised communication across the globe. Short messages akin to modern mobile phone text could be transmitted along a wire using electricity, and the code he developed in the 1830s with his often forgotten collaborator Alfred Vail. These messages were expensive and required highly skilled telegraph operators but were being embraced by governments and businesses.

Telegraph lines were a common sight in England, Europe and America by the 1850s and it wasn't long before Australia's colonial governments started building their own. These lines were generally trouble-free but it was a while before cables laid on the sea floor proved as reliable. One was successfully laid across the English Channel in 1851 and another across the Irish Sea in 1853 but spanning the broad oceans was a tougher proposition. Nonetheless, in 1854 the Mediterranean Submarine Cable Company proposed to link England, India and Australia via a series of submarine cables and overland lines. It was an audacious project by a company only formed the previous year.

The company's promoters Brett and Carmichael wrote to the Australian colonial governments outlining their plan to land a cable on the west coast of Australia. They wanted a contribution towards the cost of building a telegraph line from Exmouth Gulf to Adelaide and on to Melbourne and Sydney.⁷ It was audacious because submarine cables were still in their infancy and there was only a solitary short telegraph line in Australia at the time, running from Melbourne to Williamstown and completed in February 1854.⁸ The company managed to lay a cable across the Mediterranean Sea but it promptly failed and their proposed extension to India and Australia was abandoned.

The Atlantic Telegraph Company laid a cable from Ireland to Newfoundland in 1858 but it stopped working after a short time and its shareholders lost their money. Despite this, cable entrepreneurs continued to seek private investment and government support for schemes to link the continents. The most persistent promoters of an Anglo–Australian cable were British businessmen Lionel and Frank Gisborne.⁹ Frank Gisborne came to Australia in 1859 to talk to its various colonial governments on behalf of the Red Sea

and India Telegraph Company.¹⁰ He called on the South Australian governor, Sir Richard MacDonnell, in Adelaide in July 1859. His company had laid a cable down the Red Sea from Suez to Aden by that time and manufactured another, which it intended laying across the Arabian Sea to Karachi in December. There were telegraph lines running across India to Rangoon, in neighbouring Burma, and an extension to Singapore was planned.

Frank Gisborne had an agreement with the Netherlands Government willing to pay for a cable from Singapore to Batavia (now Jakarta), capital of their Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). Gisborne wanted the Australian governments to contribute an estimated £800,000 to the cost of connecting Australia to Java. The first submarine cable would go from Banjoewangi in Java to Port Essington on the north coast of Australia, via Timor. A second would be laid through the Torres Strait to Cape York. A third cable would run down the east coast from Cape York to Cleveland Bay, with a fourth from there to the new settlement at Moreton Bay, now Brisbane.¹¹ It would then just be a matter of building a telegraph line from Brisbane to Sydney.¹² The cable companies wanted to maximise the length of submarine cables, rather than use overland lines, because the longer the cable, the more money in it for them. However, Gisborne had overlooked the fact that his proposed route around the north and east coasts involved laying cable on a sea floor with lots of coral. In subsequent years he modified his scheme to include a telegraph line from the Gulf of Carpentaria to Brisbane.

Why not an overland route?

The Gisborne scheme came to nothing because the Englishman was unable to convince all the Australian colonies to back it financially.¹³ South Australia had other ideas. Its governor MacDonnell was advocating an alternative route in 1859. Why not bring the cable ashore at the mouth of the Victoria River in the Northern Territory, or further west at Cambridge Gulf in Western Australia, and then build a telegraph line south to Adelaide?¹⁴

Adelaide was the first port of call in Australia for most of the ships sailing from Europe and so the first to receive news from overseas. In addition, the colony had played a leading role in the development of telegraphy in Australia

in the preceding couple of years, under the direction of its superintendent of telegraphs Charles Todd. Governor MacDonnell wanted Adelaide to become the telegraph capital of Australia but Gisborne's scheme would have the opposite effect, putting it at the wrong end of an intercolonial telegraph network.¹⁵ Gisborne's scheme would hand the advantage to Queensland, allowing it to charge the other colonies a transit fee for all messages it relayed in and out of Australia.¹⁶

However, MacDonnell could see beyond this simple revenue issue. Constructing an overland telegraph line through the heart of Australia to Adelaide, rather than laying cable around the north coast to Brisbane, would be an enormous boost for the economy of South Australia and stimulate development of the huge expanse of unsettled country lying between its existing outposts in the Flinders Ranges and the north coast.

Sir Richard MacDonnell came to South Australia in June 1855. He was a well-educated man, fond of both outdoor and intellectual activities, which he duly fostered in the colony. He'd graduated in law from Trinity College Dublin where he'd excelled in both the sciences and the classics. Before he came to Adelaide he served as the chief justice of Gambia and then as its governor, followed by brief spells administering St Lucia and St Vincent in the Caribbean. He was a strong energetic leader but not always diplomatic and so clashed with other strong-willed figures in Adelaide politics at the time. His years as governor were characterised by his clear commitment to advancing the colony's future, encouraging exploration and settling outback areas. He was well aware of South Australia's economic limitations and realised its future depended upon the discovery of minerals and new grazing land in the north.

MacDonnell asked Charles Todd to prepare a detailed report on the practicability and likely cost of an overland telegraph line.¹⁷ Todd was not an imposing man but he had proven a very able administrator and was as energetic as the governor. He was recruited from the Royal Observatory at Greenwich and arrived in the colony five months after MacDonnell. He too had thoughts of global telecommunication in his head. His speech at his wedding before he left England in 1855 included a quip that he would like to

see a telegraphic string stretching around the world like the pearl necklace adorning the neck of his young wife Alice. At his farewell from Greenwich a month later he reputedly said he hoped 'he would be instrumental in bringing England and Australia into telegraphic communication'.¹⁸

Todd discussed the proposal with Frank Gisborne when the cable entrepreneur visited Adelaide in 1859. Gisborne could see that the South Australians lacked enthusiasm for his company's scheme but he was equally unimpressed with theirs. No white man had been to the heart of the continent and the Top End of Australia had defied three attempts at white settlement. In the end it didn't matter because his company's cable across the Arabian Sea to Karachi failed a couple of weeks after it was laid later that year. It was going to be a while before anything happened in Australia.

2

Arguably Australia's greatest explorer

Three-and-a-half years elapsed before John McDouall Stuart, arguably Australia's greatest explorer, proved the feasibility of an overland telegraph route. His epic crossing of the continent from south to north in 1862 was an achievement touted well beyond Australia's shores. It was the culmination of four-and-a-half years of relentless endeavour by a remarkably persistent and driven man. Stuart was constantly in the saddle between May 1858 and December 1862, exploring South Australia and the Northern Territory. Unlike his tragic and less competent contemporaries Burke and Wills, he lived to tell the tale because he knew when it was time to stop, retreat and try again.

Stuart got close to the Northern Territory border in 1859. He reached Attack Creek, 1000 kilometres further north, in 1860 before being forced to turn around and head all the way back to Adelaide. He tried again in 1861, getting as far as Newcastle Waters before having to call it quits. He finally succeeded in 1862. Today there is a highway, which bears this indomitable explorer's name, stretching across the continent from Port Augusta to Darwin. It diverges from the tracks of his equally indomitable little mare Polly but is a fitting memorial to an amazing quest to reach the geographical centre of Australia and then go beyond it to the north coast.

A small giant with two dubious friends

John McDouall Stuart was a small, wiry man born at Dysart in Scotland where his father was an army captain. He studied civil engineering at the Scottish Naval and Military Academy before sailing to South Australia in September 1838, a few days after his 23rd birthday. There was plenty of survey work available in the new colony and he quickly found a job as a draftsman. Five years after he landed in the colony, he joined Charles Sturt's quest to be the first white man to reach the geographical centre of Australia.

Like many others, Captain Sturt was convinced there was a sea in the heart of the continent and took a boat to sail on it. His expedition stirred up interest in Adelaide. The day he departed, 10 August 1844, was declared a public holiday. Sturt led his men east to the Murray River and then followed the Darling upstream. They went beyond present-day Broken Hill to the Coopers Creek and ended up in the Simpson Desert north-west of Birdsville. To his great disappointment, there was no inland sea on which to launch the boat and access to the centre was blocked by a seemingly endless expanse of red sand dunes. John McDouall Stuart learned a valuable lesson from this lumbering expedition with wagons and stock. He realised the key to success in the parched heart of Australia was to travel light and keep on the move. He chewed this over many times in the years after he returned to Adelaide, contemplating a foray of his own to the centre.

After a short, unsuccessful business venture in the city, Stuart worked in the Port Lincoln area for several years. In 1854 he accompanied William Finke as surveyor on a trip to the North Flinders Ranges in search of copper and gold. Finke was born into a wealthy family in Hanover and was on board one of the first ships to sail to South Australia after the colony was established at the end of 1836. He soon made money from land speculation and acquired a reputation for being a sharp businessman, though some of his enterprises had a dubious odour to them. The shy German and the quiet Scot spent a lot of time in the Flinders Ranges and sussed out a number of potential mining claims. Finke had a good knowledge of rocks and geology. As they picked over the region's natural resources, the two men wondered what might lie in the flat land beyond the ranges. South Australians called this the Far

North Country and Edward John Eyre was the only explorer to have really penetrated it.

William Finke's main interest was mining but his equally shrewd friend James Chambers had broader business interests. Chambers hungered for land and the prospect of a stock route across the continent to the north-west coast, from where horses and other stock might be shipped to India and China.¹ Like Finke, he was an early South Australian settler. He quickly set himself up as a carrier when he arrived from England with his wife Catherine in 1837. He sold his business before a trip back to England in 1853 to visit family but returned with horses, sheep and cattle of the best breeds.² He then devoted his energy to building up a pastoral and mining empire, which he directed from his mansion Montefiore House in North Adelaide. He loved a drink, and reputedly started the day with a whisky, but it did not distract him from the business of making money.

Chambers and Finke lodged claims for a number of localities Stuart surveyed in the Flinders Ranges. In 1857 they started mining copper from a deposit near the southern boundary of Oratunga, a pastoral run that James Chambers' brother John had stocked five years earlier. It was the first mine in the North Flinders Ranges.³

The following year Finke employed Stuart to explore the country on the western side of Lake Torrens and he set off from Oratunga in May with two other men. They came across a significant watercourse running into another large expanse of salt, later named Lake Eyre. From there they rode west to the largely treeless moonscape, now known as the Coober Pedy opal fields. Then they worked their way south, through present-day Tarcoola, to Smoky and Streaky bays, and finished up at Port Augusta. Stuart called the watercourse Chambers Creek but it was later renamed Stuart Creek. It had long stretches of water that he assumed were permanent and he said it was 'as fine a creek of water I have seen in the Colony'.⁴ He asked the government for land there, as a reward for his exploration, and was eventually given a 14-year lease on 1000 square miles, rent free for four years.

William Finke engaged Stuart again in 1859, with James Chambers also chipping in money. They wanted him to go further north, to the Davenport

Range to check it out for gold. This range, west of Lake Eyre, was discovered the previous year by Peter Warburton, the colony's police commissioner, who named its highest point Mount Margaret.⁵ Stuart left in April, accompanied by David Herrgott and Louis Muller, both of whom had spent time on the Victorian goldfields. One of John Chambers' stockmen rode with them part of the way.⁶ They headed first to Chambers Creek so Stuart could survey the land he wanted there. David Herrgott discovered an impressive cluster of mound springs on the way, releasing an abundance of hot water. Stuart named them Herrgott Springs. In the following two months, they explored the western side of Lake Eyre and went north to latitude 27°S, beyond present-day Oodnadatta. They were only 100 kilometres from South Australia's border with the Northern Territory but had to turn back because they'd run out of horseshoes. They got back to Chambers Creek at the end of June 1859.

Stuart had opened the door to the centre of the continent. On 18 July, he met with Sir Richard MacDonnell in Adelaide.⁷ The governor was impressed. MacDonnell had encouraged exploration since coming to Adelaide in 1855 and urged the government to support a transcontinental expedition led by Stuart. The response was miserly. All the politicians would offer was a reward of £2000 to the first person to cross the continent through the centre. James Chambers was not satisfied with this and petitioned officials to commit three times this figure to a Stuart expedition: £1000 at the start and a further £5000 on its successful completion.⁸ He did not get a favourable response.⁹ Concern in some circles about Chambers' business dealings, and those of his partner Finke, was undoubtedly a factor in this.

While Stuart was exploring South Australia's Far North, his two patrons had gotten into hot water over a scheme to sell their copper mining interests in the North Flinders to English speculators. Finke boarded a ship for England on 18 June 1859 to float an entity called the Great Northern Copper Mining Company on the London market. James Chambers had persuaded a prominent South Australian, the former sea captain John Hart, to go with Finke as guide and adviser. Just four days before the ship was due to leave, Chambers and Finke asked their friend Commissioner for Lands John Neales to issue leases for a couple more claims they had in the Flinders. A new Act

had come into force governing the terms of mineral leases in the colony but no regulations had yet been issued under it. Despite this, Neales obligingly did what he was asked but instead of sending the leases to the chief secretary's office for endorsement, he sent them directly to the governor Sir Richard MacDonnell for a quick signature. MacDonnell was concerned that this was not the normal procedure but assumed all was in order and promptly complied with the request. However, questions were soon asked about their validity and new leases had to be prepared and mailed to England.¹⁰ This was embarrassing for the governor, but worse was to come.

In October 1859, four months after Finke and Hart sailed for England, MacDonnell set off on horseback to inspect land Stuart had recently explored in the Far North. His party included George Goyder and Chief Inspector of Police George Hamilton. The governor was away from Adelaide three months during which time he named several geographical features.¹¹ Most notable among these was Lake Eyre, honouring the man who had explored to the shore of this lake's southern extension in 1840. Eyre had thought it was part of Lake Torrens, which he assumed formed a giant horseshoe of salt around the top of the Flinders Ranges.

MacDonnell checked out the Chambers and Finke copper mines on his way north. He was unhappy when he saw that no big lode of copper had been found, and in fact it looked like the richest deposits had already been worked out. He was even more upset when he later learnt that a statement he had made to parliament was used out of context in the Great Northern Copper Mining Company's prospectus: 'for the purpose of giving ... a fictitious value to the mines ...'¹² The investors Finke found in London had no idea they were buying shares in a company of dubious value and doubtful prospects. There was a parliamentary inquiry into the affair in June the following year but Finke and Chambers managed to survive the episode. A subsequent inquiry in October 1862 cleared John Hart of any wrongdoing.¹³ But the affair tarnished MacDonnell's reputation with the Colonial Office in London, despite his attempts to explain the unauthorised use of his name.¹⁴ Relations between the governor and Stuart's two dubious patrons were permanently soured, though he retained his admiration for the little explorer.