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## Australia and A Wire Through the Heart

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## Australia and A Wire Through the Heart

### Abstract

Throughout a period of exploration in the colony of Australia, the development of the Overland Telegraph, as discovered by Charles Todd, increased Australian interaction on a global scale. Although the documentary *A Wire Through the Heart* does not depict all of the complex struggles English colonizers faced when settling Australia, the film accurately reflects the technological advancements, the significance of explorers, and environmental difficulties many colonizers encountered in Australia throughout the early 1800s. Alongside the increase in communication with the rest of the world, the Overland Telegraph assisted in the development of a unique, Australian culture separate from its original intent as a mercantilist colony.

### Keywords

Australia, Technology, Telegraph, Exploration

### Disciplines

Communication Technology and New Media | Film and Media Studies | History of the Pacific Islands

### Comments

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*Australia and A Wire Through the Heart*

By: Addison Lomax

Due: Friday, March 26<sup>th</sup>

HIS-288: Modern Australia

Professor Birkner

*I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work*

*and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.*

Following the initial settlement of Australia, the British inhabitants sought to increase the value of the colony to the English economy. The increase in population, the transition from a convict colony to a free colony, and the industrialization occurring throughout the mid-1800s in Australia promoted an environment of ongoing change. As Australia transitioned into a free colony, the rise of exploration promoted technological discovery. The Overland Telegraph was a key advance brought forth by Australian exploration. Although the documentary *A Wire Through the Heart* does not depict all of the struggles English colonizers faced when settling Australia, the film accurately reflects the technological advancements, societal importance of explorers, and environmental difficulties many colonizers encountered in Australia throughout the early 1800s.

The 2007 documentary film *A Wire Through the Heart* depicts the development of the Overland Telegraph throughout the mid-1800s across the Australian bush. Directed by Darcy Yuille, the film depicts the difficulties of exploration, hardships faced by explorers, and the eventual triumph of the Overland Telegraph, a series of technical lines connecting Australia to the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> The documentary follows the storyline of Charles Todd's plans for the telegraph. Over the course of the film, the audience also experiences the struggles of John Stuart and his expedition crew in discovering a route to the north coast that would be suitable for the Overland Telegraph's line.<sup>2</sup> Yuille emphasizes the difficult struggles of the expedition teams, rather than providing a nostalgic and theatrical account of the events. The film describes the accounts of all three of John Stuart's expeditions to arrive to the other coast of Australia, and travel through the center. Additionally, the film contextualizes their exploration of Central

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<sup>1</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcy Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Australia with the counter-experiences of famous Australian explorers, Robert Burke, and William Wills.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the documentary, Yuille describes the experience to which the Overland Telegraph was accomplished. The Overland Telegraph was one example of the many technological advancements occurring in Australia at the time; however, it also serves as a primary example of the importance of exploration and the crucial impact the environment had on the lives of the English settlers in Australia.

The documentary follows the story closely, emphasizing the darker aspects of Australian exploration, such as the encounters with the natives and the personal burdens the explorers faced, in addition to the heroic triumphs of crossing the continent. Yuille particularly notes the resistance of the native Australians to the explorers. Because “explorers pushed through territories with little consideration for the sensitivities of needs of the indigenous inhabitants,” the Aborigines sometimes met the explorers with opposition.<sup>4</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart* depicted an account of a Warramungu Massacre. In June 1860, the Warramungu people attacked Stuart and his fellow explorers because they were using tribal lands for an extended period of time.<sup>5</sup> The violence they were met with ultimately led the expedition to return home with plans to venture into the bush again. Additionally, the documentary accurately portrays the character of typical explorers as “legion of young men who come to these colonies hopeful to make fortune.”<sup>6</sup> Many individuals went for the fame and glory that was anticipated when they returned. The documentary notes the flamboyant funerals for Burke and Wills, juxtaposed with the final days of John Stuart, which included isolation and depression. Yuille does not ignore the dark realities

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<sup>3</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcie Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Dane Kennedy, “Encounters,” *The Last Blank Spaces*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 209.

<sup>5</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcie Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

of exploration. Many explorers carried a burden, as they “had to speak and write about what they had seen and done and felt in ways that did not diverge too markedly from prevailing norms and popular representations”<sup>7</sup> Following Stuart’s return from his third and final expedition to Central Australia, he was virtually blind, and began to drink heavily.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, he was met with an elaborate parade when he and his crew returned; however, he did not speak.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, he moved to England where Australia exploration was not a popular topic, and had a small, quiet funeral, since the public’s sympathy for his adventures faded.<sup>10</sup> The documentary provides a balanced account of both the success and difficulties associated with the exploration of Central Australia.

The harsh environment of the Australia bush impacted the experience of explorers, the development of the Overland Telegraph, and general life in Australia. The environment and weather in Australia differed from the surroundings in England, leading many settlers to respond negatively to the shift. Explorer, Charles Sturt noted, “A veil hung over Central Australia that could neither be pierced or raised.”<sup>11</sup> The English settlers experienced harsh conditions, particularly in the center of the continent. Explorers were encouraged to explore the center of the continent despite the unforgiving temperatures and harsh winds.<sup>12</sup> One explorer noted, “The hate from the Sun is not the worst, but hot winds blowing off the land from the Northern Countries that lays North or North East.”<sup>13</sup> The English settlers worsened their situation through their

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<sup>7</sup> Dane Kennedy, “Celebrities,” *The Last Blank Spaces*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 236.

<sup>8</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcie Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Flannery, “Charles Sturt,” *The Explorers: Stories of Discovery and Adventure*, ed. Tim Flannery, (Melbourne: Grove Press, 1998), 227.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> David Fitzpatrick, “Normile Letters,” *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*, (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 70.

exploitation of the land. Despite efforts from the aborigines to assist the Europeans, “the Europeans had little desire to assimilate into Aboriginal society”<sup>14</sup> The Eurocentrism and presence of cultural superiority provided the English short-term economic benefits; however, they eventually faced negative consequences.<sup>15</sup> The Europeans believed in “Terra Nullius” or “land belonging to nobody.”<sup>16</sup> Because of their sense of cultural superiority, they did not listen to the native Australians and continued down a trajectory of ongoing environmental degradation.<sup>17</sup> The pastoral lifestyle of the Europeans had detrimental consequences. Sheep—which were not native to Australia—destroyed flora and fauna, colonial expansion continued to force native Australians out of their territory, and the rapid spread of European disease impressed catastrophic consequences upon the Aborigines.<sup>18</sup> Overall, the Europeans learned that there were areas of profitability in Australia, and therefore, used the environment for economic gain, at the expense of the natives.<sup>19</sup> Their actions ultimately led to an increase in harsh conditions, particularly towards the center of Australia.

Throughout *A Wire Through the Heart*, the environment of Central Australia is a pertinent theme. The documentary portrays the struggles many explorers had throughout their respective journeys across the continent. Especially during the expeditions of John Stuart, the arid conditions caused by drought, paired with the harsh heat led to many problems including the

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<sup>14</sup> Stuart Macintyre, “Conquest, 1822-1850,” *A Concise History of Australia- Fourth Edition*, (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Birkner, “Aspirations and Transformations,” HIS 228: Modern Australia (Class lecture, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, March 1, 2021)

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Macintyre, “Newcomers, c. 1600-1792,” *A Concise History of Australia- Fourth Edition*, (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 34.

<sup>17</sup> William J. Lines, “Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land,” *Taming the Great South Land*, (New Sydney, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 91.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Birkner, “Aspirations and Transformations,” HIS 228: Modern Australia (Class lecture, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, March 1, 2021)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

declining health not only of Stuart and his fellow explorers, but also their horses.<sup>20</sup> Yuille incorporated re-enactments of the explorer's journeys which emphasized the desert-like conditions in Central Australia, in addition to the negative opinions of the explorers towards their derogatory conditions.<sup>21</sup> Stuart had decided to go on the exploration of Central Australia because "his grazier employer wanted to drive cattle from Adelaide to Darwin for export to India."<sup>22</sup> Economic motivations led to an increase in the terrible conditions, as the cattle patted down the land, making dust and soil rise. The pastoral lifestyle encouraged environmental degradation, as seen in the documentary through the arid conditions and droughts explorers such as Stuart faced during their expeditions to Central Australia in the mid-1800s.

Despite the harsh conditions and environment in Central Australia, many explorers made the journey into the bush for the cause of expansion and societal advancement. The settlers in Australia, "Began to view the exploration of the interior as investment in their future and an expression of their character in the community."<sup>23</sup> Because of their increased confidence in the colony, "Explorers' exploits and travails could turn them into celebrities."<sup>24</sup> Many explorers made the decision to venture into the outback for the fame associated with it. Additionally, the European governments wanted to know what the rest of Australia looked like. Some individuals speculated the existence of a large body of water in the center of the continent, others simply wanted to know how the flora and fauna differed from that of the coast.<sup>25</sup> Still, some explorers went on expeditions in search of routes for communication, specifically in regard to increased

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<sup>20</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcie Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dane Kennedy, "Celebrities," *The Last Blank Spaces*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 238.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Birkner, "Urbanization and a Modernizing Australia; A Comparative View," HIS 228: Modern Australia (Class lecture, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, March 17, 2021).

networks for imports and exports to the coast of Australia.<sup>26</sup> While there were certainly practical reasons for exploring the center of Australia, “memorialization of men who had died while exploring unknown territory proved a potent means of mobilizing the public’s sympathies and sense of allegiance to the colonial state and the imperial enterprise.”<sup>27</sup> The explorers Burke and Wills proved crucial to the sense of Australian pride that emerged from the age of exploration of Central Australia. Although Burke and Wills destroyed their relationship with the native people they were with, ran out of water, and were derogatory to their crew and the native Australians, John King, the sole survivor of their expedition, became a celebrity when he returned home.<sup>28</sup> Burke and Wills did not return from their exploration, but they still became household names through the stories of bravery and courage relayed by King.<sup>29</sup> The push for exploration in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Australia allowed for a “growing sense of community and consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> The actions of the explorers and more prominently, their legacies encouraged civic pride and “transcontinental commitment to the British imperial project.”<sup>31</sup> Explorers served as cultural icons to the Australians at the time and provided a unifying movement throughout the continent.

One key technological advancement brought forth by Australian exploration was the Overland Telegraph. In addition to uniting the continent, the telegraph provided a “3000km communication line from Port Augusta to Darwin, which connected with an underwater cable that made it possible to send messages to the UK.”<sup>32</sup> The Overland Telegraph provided a way to

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Birkner, “Urbanization and a Modernizing Australia; A Comparative View,” HIS 228: Modern Australia (Class lecture, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, March 17, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Dane Kennedy, “Celebrities,” The Last Blank Spaces, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 243.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Birkner, “Urbanization and a Modernizing Australia; A Comparative View,” HIS 228: Modern Australia (Class lecture, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, March 17, 2021)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Dane Kennedy, “Celebrities,” The Last Blank Spaces, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 240.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>32</sup> Troy Lennon, “Classmate Series 17 #36—Overland Telegraph.” The Daily Telegraph, 21 Nov. 2017.

connect the previously isolated island to the rest of the world. Without the work of explorers, particularly John Stuart, the telegraph would not have been developed at the same rate it was. The telegraph line was completed in 1872, marking an important point in the evolution of technology in Australia. The development of the system “established direct electronic communication from Europe; the repeater stations became bases for prospectors and pastoral pioneers in Central Australia.”<sup>33</sup> The gold rushes and Land Acts of the 1860s encouraged an influx of immigrants to Australia, resulting in new opportunities as well as increased racial tensions.<sup>34</sup> Settlers documented the changing population, noting, “The country is populated by every class and race of people. There is Irish, English, Scotch, Chinese, Germans, Yankees, Natives, and Blacks.”<sup>35</sup> Suddenly, instead of the telegraph only connecting the continent for business reasons, individuals also wanted a means by which to contact their home nations and families. The Overland Telegraph represented a faster way to connect Australia with the rest of the world once the explorers were able to achieve the feat of crossing the center of the continent.

From the opening scene of Stuart fighting through the brush on the northern coast, to the final moment when Todd receives the first telegraph message, *A Wire Through the Heart* contextualizes the thoughts of the individuals involved with the development of the telegraph, as well as provides a balanced approach to the competitive nature of Australian exploration. The documentary emphasizes the time and energy it took to complete the technological advancement, since the telegraph was to be completed in three phases: north from Adelaide, through the center,

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<sup>33</sup> Stuart Macintyre, “Progress, 1851-1888,” *A Concise History of Australia- Fourth Edition*, (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 104.

<sup>34</sup> William J. Lines, “Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land,” *Taming the Great South Land*, (New Sydney, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 109.

<sup>35</sup> David Fitzpatrick, “Normile Letters,” *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*, (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 72.

and down from the Northern Coast.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the physical struggles of completing the line and crossing the harsh environment in the center of the continent, “the real battle was political.”<sup>37</sup> Following the competition between Stuart and Burke and Wills, the Queensland colony wanted to take control of the line with the creation of the Northern Territory. Todd, however, was able to convince them to take his deal.<sup>38</sup> The presence of competition encouraged the different territories to move deliberately and quickly to ensure their individual success against their competitors. Their team was pressed for time, but ultimately the submarine cable connecting Australia to Britain broke. The line connected Australia to Europe; therefore, the telegraph could not receive or send messages until it was complete. Because of the accident, the British Telegraph Line shifted their focus to working on repairing the cable rather than continuing to pressure Todd to finish the telegraph.<sup>39</sup> The development and success of the Overland Telegraph consisted of numerous political and social problems which ultimately affected the timeline of the expedition and production of the line.

The documentary did not glorify the experiences of the laborers establishing the Overland Telegraph. In addition to acknowledging the fierce competition to complete the project, and the economic difficulties with Britain, many of the telegraph poles could not be secured in the ground due to the floods and downpours, additional environmental difficulties.<sup>40</sup> Yuille emphasizes the trying circumstances through re-enactments and portrayals of the environment and experiences of the different characters in the development of the telegraph. Additionally, the documentary includes numerous diary entries from Charles Todd and John Stuart depicting their

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<sup>36</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcie Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

respective journeys and feelings over the course of the telegraph's timeline. Through incorporating real historical documents and testimonies, the documentary captures the reality of life in Australia at the time. Eventually, in August 1872 the Overland Telegraph sent its first message from the Central Mount Stuart in honor of John Stuart, who had paved the way for the line's success.<sup>41</sup> Overall, the film does not gloss over the physical struggles of the telegraph's progress; rather it explains the circumstances that led to the technological success in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia.

The explorers' triumphs and the success of the Overland Telegraph had lasting impacts on the Australian societies. By encouraging individuals to come to Australia due to its recently developed relationship with the world, a "place of exile had become a location of choice."<sup>42</sup> While the continent was still geographically isolated and communication was not instantaneous, settlers had to wait months for London newspapers. Due to the Overland Telegraph, the communication decreased to a matter of weeks, or even days.<sup>43</sup> In relation to business, the telegraph "[gave] shippers sufficiently fresh information about markets and prices to enable them to place orders and arrange shipping on the basis of real conditions instead of hunches."<sup>44</sup> Additionally, weather could be predicted once newspapers moved increasingly to daily publications.<sup>45</sup> The Overland Telegraph was a means by which Australia could be connected to the world, and the country could have a spot on the map in an international sense. By reinforcing

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<sup>41</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcie Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Stuart Macintyre, "Conquest, 1822-1850," *A Concise History of Australia- Fourth Edition*, (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 88.

<sup>43</sup> *A Wire Through the Heart*, directed by Darcie Yuille (2007; San Francisco, CA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress : Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 36.

<sup>45</sup> Denis Cryle, "From data to news: weather reporting, telegraphy and the press in colonial Australia." *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, (November 2015).

developments facilitated by the gold rush, the telegraph, “colonies were no longer regarded primarily as ex-prisons, but rather places of opportunity and places of wealth, employment, and commerce.”<sup>46</sup>

To some extent, the Overland Telegraph provided to the Australian settlers, the same sense of connectedness today’s generation faces with the presence of social media. As society increasingly advanced technology, the time it took to communicate with others in different places shortened. Today, most individuals receive their news, politics, weather, and updates on social media. Additionally, the messaging styles are similar, since “to send a telegram, customers were charged by the number of characters or words used. People developed ways to shorten messages, not unlike the abbreviations used in texting or on Twitter today.”<sup>47</sup> The development of social media, although it may have originally been a means of casual communication, has developed into a crucial news outlet for modern society similar to the establishment of the Overland Telegraph. Communication is an essential aspect to any culture and community. In the first encounters with the Aborigines following the initial settlement of Australia, discrepancies in communication led to conflict and confusion. As society advanced, the Australians recognized the need for a communication system to link them back to their motherland.

*A Wire Through the Heart* accurately contextualizes the evolution of efforts to re-enforce the relationship between the European settlers in Australia and the rest of the world. The Overland Telegraph encouraged Australian pride and unity, as the continent transitioned from its past convict state, towards a land of opportunity. Although the documentary *A Wire Through the Heart* does not depict all of the complex struggles English colonizers faced when settling

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<sup>46</sup> Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts, “Hargreaves Discovers Gold at Ophir: Australia’s ‘Golden Age,’” *Turning Points in Australian History*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 72.

<sup>47</sup> Troy Lennon, “Classmate Series 17 #36—Overland Telegraph.” *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 Nov. 2017.

Australia, the film accurately reflects the technological advancements, the significance of explorers, and environmental difficulties many colonizers encountered in Australia throughout the early 1800s.

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