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### The Eucla Recorder (1898 –1900)

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#### Abstract

The rise of Eucla in the late nineteenth-century as a border telegraph station, located on Western Australia's southern maritime border with South Australia, has been celebrated by Moyal (1984) for the cohesion and resilience of its skilled workforce. This article further explores the Eucla story, offering a vivid snapshot of the community's preoccupations and challenges at the end of the 19th century through the pages of its monthly newspaper, the Eucla Recorder (1898 – 1900). Little if any attention has been paid to its community journalism, despite the Eucla Recorder's unusual setting and distinctive mode of production. The following case study documents the life of the Eucla Recorder, extending its scope to the social and political attitudes of the telegraph staff which produced it.

#### Introduction

Despite its remoteness and the belated construction of the great east-west telegraph line linking Western Australia to the eastern colonies, the Eucla telegraph station has attracted considerable attention from telecommunication historians, most notably from Ann Moyal (1984) who recognised its strategic yet remote position as comparable with that of the Alice Springs station at the heart of the Overland Telegraph Line. Both remote stations were strategically chosen for the retransmission of messages over vast distances across the Australian continent. But if Alice Springs, situated at the centre of the north-south telegraph was better known than Eucla on the east-west line, the rise of Eucla, symbolised by its own newspaper, was arguably more rapid. One of the key roles of the community newspaper was to promote the local interest and the *Eucla Recorder* was no exception in this respect. In so doing, it provides a closer assessment of the environmental and psychological challenges faced by the settlers and telegraph workers who moved into the area.

Yet it will be also shown that the *Eucla Recorder* and its editors did not confine themselves to reporting local issues. For while tracking the movements of staff throughout the telegraph station network, the monthly paper editorialised on the great issues of the day, such as the advent of Federation, the campaign to enfranchise women and the dramatic events of the Boer War in which Australian telegraphists were destined to play a part. The diversity of the *Eucla Recorder*'s coverage owed something to Eucla's status as a border station, distinct from Alice Springs. As such, it comprised a wider microcosm of colonial society drawn from not one, but several Australian colonies.

## Genesis of the newspaper

Community journalism was a feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian newspapers (Cryle, 2017; Manion, 1982), occurring in different formats and a range of different circumstances. In colonial Australia, community journalism arose in the range of circumstances, starting with newspapers printed on immigrant ships bound for Australia, and continuing in embryonic settlements, often distant from the larger towns and ports of the colonies. In Australia as in America, newspapers acted as 'parish pumps,' promoting local progress and improved communication with the outside world (Kirkpatrick, 1984). In this respect, the *Eucla Recorder* perpetuated similar colonial values, albeit with a decidedly different outlook. For while newspapers, which began with limited circulation, thrived in regional mining and agricultural centres, the *Eucla Recorder* operated in a more remote environment, dominated by civil service employees, and without the usual spur of private enterprise to sustain it.

Arguably this experiment undertaken on a remote telegraph station at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was unique, operating as it did in a remote locality on Western Australia's maritime border with South Australia.

The *Eucla Recorder*, a voluntary monthly enterprise which first appeared on 15 October 1898, was printed and published by the combined telegraph staff working at the station. The initiative for the paper came from the Western Australians, following a meeting in their dining room to establish a printing press syndicate (*Eucla Recorder*, 1898). Shares were taken out on a printing press, and a committee was appointed by nomination and election to edit the enterprise. Unsurprisingly the first editor, W J Simmons was a Western Australian (*Eucla Recorder* 26 May 1900), and Western Australia's Postmaster General, R A Sholl praised the initiative when it began circulating throughout the telegraph fraternity of that colony.

The appearance of the *Eucla Recorder* corresponded with other positive developments at the station, including the construction of new stone quarters in place of wooden cabins and tents, in September 1898, and the declaration of Eucla as a township and a port (Saunders 2005, p.10). For despite its remote coastal location on the edge of the Nullarbor plain, Eucla had grown by the turn of the century into an important communication hub for the East-West telegraph line and become one of the busiest stations outside the Australian capital cities (Moyal 1984, p.66). As Ann Moyal (1984) demonstrates in her epic account, *Clear Across Australia*, the telegraph line followed mineral discoveries, most notably of gold which was booming at Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie in Western Australia at a time when the economies of the eastern colonies had fallen into depression (Blainey 1993).

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Figure 1. Eucla New Station 1902

Drawing upon the reminiscences of Eucla telegraphists like Frederick Simmons, Moyal (1987, p.80) affirms the camaraderie and fellowship of the operators, despite the tough and primitive environment in which they worked and lived. This was in part inspired by the growth of Eucla as wives joined the growing settlement of telegraphists and breeding large families (and) carefully conserving their stores before the visits of sailing ships and steamers with supplies (Moyal 1984, p.110). Photographs of the telegraph station community, carefully documented by itinerant photographers, confirm the formal dress conventions of the Eucla operators as a new status group with the colonial society, one which nevertheless made few concessions to comfort throughout their rotating eight hour work shifts. Valuable as such photos undoubtedly are, an examination of the printed record in the *Eucla Recorder* enables a deeper understanding of the collective attitudes which helped bind this remote community together, not only the attitudes of its workforce, but also its social and political interests, extending to issues of gender and the approach of federation in 1901.

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Figure 2. Map of the Eyre Highway showing central position of Eucla between Perth and Adelaide

Estimates of the local population, some of it transient, vary from fifty to as many as one hundred (*Eucla Recorder* 6 January 1900; Bursil 1898, p.91), some of which can be explained by the changing nature of telegraph work around that time. From humble beginnings, with a simplex (single) wire and only four operators, Eucla station was, by 1898, employing 26 operators recruited from both the Western Australian and South Australian colonies to work the recently installed and more sophisticated duplex and quadruplex systems (*Eucla Recorder* 12 November 1898).



Consequently, at the time of the paper's appearance, a proud *Eucla Recorder* editor could declare its station to be a notable exception. For, as a border telegraph station and a halfway house with a large number of telegraph staff, Eucla outstripped any other along the Great Australian Bight in size and importance. As one famous photo of the Eucla operating room shows (Figure 2), the two rows of telegraphists from adjacent colonies, worked opposite one another along a partition the length of the room. Each passed incoming hand-written messages to their opposite number, working on the other side of the partition, who in turn translated them, using a Morse code alphabet distinctive to his own colony. Such a physical working arrangements prevailed, even when neighbouring colonial governments, unlike Western Australia and South Australia, employed the same Morse alphabet.

## Community Content

One regular item of interest featured in the *Eucla Recorder* was the arrival of the mail. The mail came overland from South Australia on a monthly basis and, in the case of Western Australia, by steamer from Albany (*Eucla Recorder* 15 October 1898; Bursil 1898, p.92). In view of the poor soil and low rainfall at Eucla, food and vegetables had to be imported, while water supplies, always limited, had to be extracted locally and carefully managed (Fuller 1971, p.88). Because letter writing was an important activity for many Eucla residents, the mail brought vital information as well as newspapers, albeit with stale news by the time of receipt. Despite the isolated location, the *Eucla Recorder* and its workforce, which rotated in and out every three to five years, remained deeply interested in communicating with the outside world and in tracking the movements of former staff, some of whom went on to serve on even more remote stations such as Broome or Darwin on the Overland Telegraph Line.

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Figure 3. Eucla telegraph room: South Australian operators at work 1902

From its inception, the *Eucla Recorder* was committed to the memory of its predecessors at the station, updating readers on the movements of former Western Australian staff; one was working on a north-western sheep station; a second was now in Darwin; another living in Perth and still manipulating the keys at headquarters; yet another had forsaken telegraph work altogether for an accountant's position in Melbourne (*Eucla Recorder* 15 October 1898). It was the status and education of the telegraph workforce that made such geographical and professional mobility possible. Conscious that hundreds of telegraph office workers were scattered across the continent, the *Eucla Recorder* also kept its readers abreast of current staff changes in and out of the settlement; to Mount Gambier in the case of one long-serving South Australian; or to Perth in the case of the *Eucla Recorder*'s own editor in May 1900. Such notices were usually accompanied by generous tributes to those departing, whether it be for their athleticism, companionship or untiring perseverance as fellow workers (*Eucla Recorder* 1 April 1899 and 31 March 1900). In tracking their movements and subsequent working lives, *Eucla Recorder* editorials fostered a wider sense of community and encouraged telegraphic esprit de corps among colleagues, past and present.

Travel journalism was also featured in the paper, including accounts by staff of their return journeys to the station from Port Lincoln along the coast, this, despite the fact that no human being (was) to be seen along that barren stretch of South Australia (*Eucla Recorder* 10 December 1898). To alleviate such long and hazardous journeys, the *Eucla Recorder* editor envisaged the construction of a railway, linking South Australia and Western Australia at Eucla on the border, and called for a survey to be undertaken for this purpose (*Eucla Recorder* 6 March 1899). His commendation corresponded with the beginnings of agitation in Western Australia for a transcontinental railway, a project destined to become a bargaining chip in the complex politics surrounding Federation.

In addition to recruiting an able editor, the *Eucla Recorder* appointed a sports writer to help encourage much-needed relaxation from the demands of the operations room and line maintenance. He covered cricket and racing on a regular basis, while angling, shooting and cycling were also part of staff leisure activities. At the same time, the paper was keen to promote indoor activities such as music, singing and reading. The *Eucla Recorder* published its own regular fictional column which it attributed, rightly or otherwise, to a local contributor (*Eucla Recorder* 15 October 1898). Previously a literary society created at the station had lapsed; but with the welcome addition of a substantial library, local reading increased and it was this improvement, more than any other, which had given rise to the idea of a newspaper. It was to remain the only production of its kind on an Australian telegraph station.

The marked gender imbalance at Eucla in favour of young males was in keeping with colonial society throughout nineteenth century Australia. In this instance, the *Eucla Recorder*, which was conscious that many young men on the staff were socially disadvantaged, assumed a paternal role as their comforter. At key moments during the year, it sought to lift spirits on the station, especially around Christmas and the New Year, when family members were conspicuously absent. Christmas concerts, organised for the event, were deemed essential by the paper for restoring flagging morale among local and community workers. After a succession of bad seasons and hot summer weather, the editor acknowledged, in one December leader of 1898, that his readers were prone to 'the blues' (*Eucla Recorder* 24 June 1899). In the same issue, he warned them against the carefree lifestyle of stockmen and drovers, claiming that the latter were too fond of drinking their wages. If 1890s bush writers like Patterson and Lawson were extolling the virtues of outback living in poetry and prose, the *Eucla Recorder* begged to differ in exhorting its young men to a regular combination of physical and mental activity (*Eucla Recorder* 10 December 1898).

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#### Figure 4. Eucla Residents 1905

Another special event designed to interest and inspire readers was its coverage of a local wedding in December 1899, the first at Eucla in the 22 years of its existence (*Eucla Recorder* 9 December 1899). Such unions, including another at Israelite Bay and a double wedding at Esperance (*Eucla Recorder* 26 May 1900) - both telegraph stations on the Western Australian side of the great east-west line - were regarded as highly newsworthy. In a community where the editor estimated that males outnumbered women and children by 6 to 1 (*Eucla Recorder* 6 January 1900), it was perhaps inevitable that the prospect of literary friendships with women would be deemed highly desirable by *Eucla Recorder* readers, with the prospect of further marital unions. In one 1899 issue, the paper published, alongside conventional advertisements one such matrimonial expression of interest inserted by a member of staff in search of a female correspondent (*Eucla Recorder* 3 March 1899). The author, a traditionalist, stipulated his terms in detail, requesting that his correspondent be 'prepossessing in appearance, docile in manner and able to make bread.' Yet his optimism may have been misplaced. For the times were changing and the pages of the *Eucla Recorder* confirmed that community awareness was beginning to change with it.

## Tackling big issues of the day: the franchise, Federation, the Boer War and the environment

In Western Australia, women's suffrage had become, in the words of the editor, 'the burning question of the year' (*Eucla Recorder* 10 December 1898). Indeed, the *Eucla Recorder* helped stimulate local discussion at the outset by publishing a letter on the rights of women in one of its early issues and asking whether the female franchise should be introduced. Voting for women and the suffrage were widely debated throughout Australia on the verge of Federation. South Australia had led the way among the Australian colonies by granting women the vote in 1895 (Australian Electoral Commission 2018). On a still more progressive note, the same colony had also granted women the right to stand for parliament, a concession well ahead of other colonies, including Western Australia, which did not endorse it until 1920.

In a border community where workers from both colonies were represented, there were bound to be considerable differences of opinion on the issue. If there were those at Eucla in favour of extending voting rights to 'the great sisterhood of mankind,' (*Eucla Recorder* 12 November 1898) as one writer put it, a majority presumably from Western Australia, where the issue was still undecided, opposed granting women voting rights on the grounds that they were 'not educated enough in politics'. Another opponent debunked their entry into politics on the grounds that it might 'breed a class of women devoid of all charm' (*Eucla Recorder* 10 December 1898). This negative viewpoint, out-of-step with general feeling in both colonies, reflected in part the dominant position of men as operators on telegraph stations, in spite of the inroads which colonial women had made as employees on telephone exchanges (Moyal 1984).

Closely related to the question of voting rights for women was the impending proclamation of Federation in 1901. Conscious of the public's limited knowledge about the machinery of federal government, the *Eucla Recorder* editor set out to explain changes to the bicameral system under the Commonwealth, including the roles of the Senate, the constitution and governing bodies like the public service into which the various colonial postal and telegraph departments would soon be merged as a single entity (*Eucla Recorder* 1 April 1899). As late as 1899, after a succession of federation conferences had canvassed these and related issues, it was clear that the colony of Western Australia, removed from the rivalries of the East Coast, was still divided, with its goldfields districts supporting a Yes vote, while other towns and districts in the populated South-West were urging a No vote (*Eucla Recorder* 9 December 1899).

Proud of their elevated status and occupation, the Eucla workforce had been trained to think beyond individual colonies, as part of a brotherhood playing an important unifying role and 'proud of the trust reposed in them by the governments and publics of their respective colonies' (*Eucla Recorder* 12 November 1899). Yet if they were nationalistic in maintaining professional networks and telegraph lines across the continent, the Eucla telegraphists were also more imperialistic than the mining community or outback workers in canvassing imperial federation and representation for Australia in the English parliament as a viable alternative to going it alone as a separate nation (*Eucla Recorder* 19 August 1899).

There was no better example of such nostalgia and imperial feeling than the newspaper's commentary on the Boer War, in which British and Australian troops became involved over this period (1899-1902). The *Eucla Recorder* consistently reported on the dramatic conflict, to which both South Australian and Western Australian telegraphists were dispatched, applauding 'the brave defenders of Ladysmith,' and adopting a strongly pro-British stance throughout. In this spirit, the editor urged local staff to 'sing the national anthem' and 'raise (their) glasses to their distant colleagues' (*Eucla Recorder* 18 August 1899), after an additional twenty telegraphists were sent to South Africa in February 1900 (*Eucla Recorder* 3 March 1900; Cryle 2017, p.231). In this way, the paper reflected the mood of the times when Australian nationalism was becoming a more potent force.

In editorialising on a series of important current issues, the *Eucla Recorder* was more likely to espouse the views of Western Australians rather than the South Australians working at the station. No doubt this reflected the editor's own background, but also Eucla's geography, situated as it was to the west of the southern border. Yet if it were true that the *Eucla Recorder* remained a Western Australian experiment, it was also prepared to advocate precedents set by South Australia on more than one occasion. The impending arrival of a rabbit plague during 1898-99 (Munday 2017) was one notable instance of its attempt to stir the Western Australian government to action. As rabbits spread relentlessly westwards along the coast, they began to destroy the fragile vegetation, compounding declining morale at the station and threatening to aggravate the drought on surrounding pastoral settlers (*Eucla Recorder* 12 November 1898 and 4 February 1899). With competing local fauna and the kangaroo skin industry in decline, growing numbers of rabbits became a reliable source of meat for wild dogs which in turn preyed on stock. The eventual introduction of cats into the neighbourhood from South Australia, provided ineffective protection against the swarming rabbits which, in time, would threaten the stability of Eucla station itself by burrowing under the dunes on which it was located and exposing the sandy fringe to the full impact of the coastal winds (Fuller 1971, pp.94-99).

Even before the arrival of rabbits, environmental issues loomed large for the paper as well as for its residents. One of the *Eucla Recorder's* consistent preoccupations was with water conservation. For although the resources of the Great Artesian Basin had been discovered as early as 1878 in Australia, this subterranean water resource did not extend beneath the Nullarbor Plain or to parts of the arid southern coastline upon which Eucla was located (Western Australian Government 2018). With the onset of the Great Drought and the withering of existing mallee vegetation, this became an urgent theme in the *Eucla Recorder*, along with the relentless search for underground water sources (*Eucla Recorder* 28 June 1900). The *Eucla Recorder*, in a bid to increase coastal population and secure the progress of the district, urged the government of Western Australia to follow the example set by neighbouring South Australia (*Eucla Recorder* 24 June 1899) which had taken the precaution of sinking 30,000 gallon wells near the station in the earlier years. A subsequent South Australian decision to further expand its network of wells east of the border in response to the drought drew repeated praise from the *Eucla Recorder* (*Eucla Recorder* 11 November 1899). At a time when water was still scarce on the western side of the border and the overland stock route to the goldfields was proving a hazardous one for local drovers, the editor persisted in calls, largely unheeded, for Western Australia to follow South Australia's more enlightened example (*Eucla Recorder* 31 March 1900).

## Conclusions

How long did the *Eucla Recorder* continue, and why did the local newspaper cease? By September of 1900, now two years into its existence and several months after the departure of its first editor, W J Simmons, there were growing signs that the energy of the staff behind the paper was dwindling. Indeed, most small colonial publications of this kind were not destined to survive for much more than two years, relying as they often did on the drive of a single individual (Cryle 1987, p.1). Newspapers of any kind are generally reluctant to divulge such adverse developments. But several years of continuous monthly publication clearly generated increasing tension between the literary staff and the printing press shareholders (*Eucla Recorder* 14 October 1899). Open criticism began to appear in its columns accusing the shareholders of showing too little appreciation of the efforts of staff. Committee meetings were unattended and suggestions to the editor's letterbox dwindled away. Yet the eventual decision to close must have created a vacuum for those who had read the *Eucla Recorder*, sustained it and recognized it for the brave and unique experiment that it was.

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