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Aboriginal Interactions with the Overland Telegraph Line, 1870–1880

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Abstract

Aboriginal interactions with the Overland Telegraph Line, along its 3000 kilometres, were never uniform. The Line passed through at least twenty Aboriginal territories; when construction commenced, fewer than half of those groups had met Europeans. Aboriginal people in the northern and southern sections had experienced some contact, while only Stuart and his small band had passed through the central section. Archival records concerning the Line's construction and its first years of operation reveal a consistent pattern of engagement: an initial phase of avoidance and fear followed by direct confrontation and engagement, often by the same Aboriginal group. In both cases, the trigger was not necessarily the white man's presence per se, but the unprecedented temptation of large amounts of a new and extraordinary resource, metal. Prudently, Charles Todd issued instructions minimising fraternisation, which repressed the growing appeal of European commodities and material; armed parties attacked three telegraph stations during the mid-1870s. A pax Britannica gradually ensued. This paper focuses upon the first ten years of Aboriginal interactions, proposing a sequence of dynamic engagement with Europeans, prefiguring the subsequent tightening control and dispossession of local Aboriginal groups along the length of the Line.

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