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.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginal, Overland Telegraph Line, History of Australian Telecommunications

Introduction

As an infrastructure project spanning an entire continent, completed within just two years, the Overland Telegraph Line was an extraordinary technological achievement. Historians agree that its success can be attributed to Charles Todd's leadership and organisational skills, overseeing all its aspects, from conception during the late 1850s to its first regular operation, in late 1872. Todd's brief was never complicated by the realisation that the country bisected by the Line was occupied and spoken for; he shared the prevailing characterisation of Aboriginal people as nomadic and rootless. In fact, the Line would fall out of use before that

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characterisation shifted to an understanding that Aboriginal people's connection to their land was ancient and enduring. All the surviving evidence suggests that Todd and his men simply failed to grasp that connection; the concern expressed in their diaries and reports regarding Aboriginal 'pilfering' of stores and equipment was almost never balanced by reference to the loss of key Aboriginal waters or the damage or destruction of sites of significance.

Aboriginal responses to the Overland Telegraph Line construction varied significantly across space and time. For Aboriginal groups associated with the Line's southern section – from Port Augusta to the Peake – contact with Europeans had already occurred by the time construction began during 1870. This also applied in the northern section, where Aboriginal people had become familiar with the survey teams working under the Goyder Survey Expedition of 1869–1870. In the central section, though, John McDouall Stuart's small and mobile expeditions had been sighted by relatively few Aboriginal people. In those instances, the pattern of engagement followed a progression from outright consternation and fear, to attempts to shadow and gain information about the newcomers, and more particularly about the objects and materials being conveyed. This stage was followed either by outright hostility and attempts to drive the exploration parties back, or

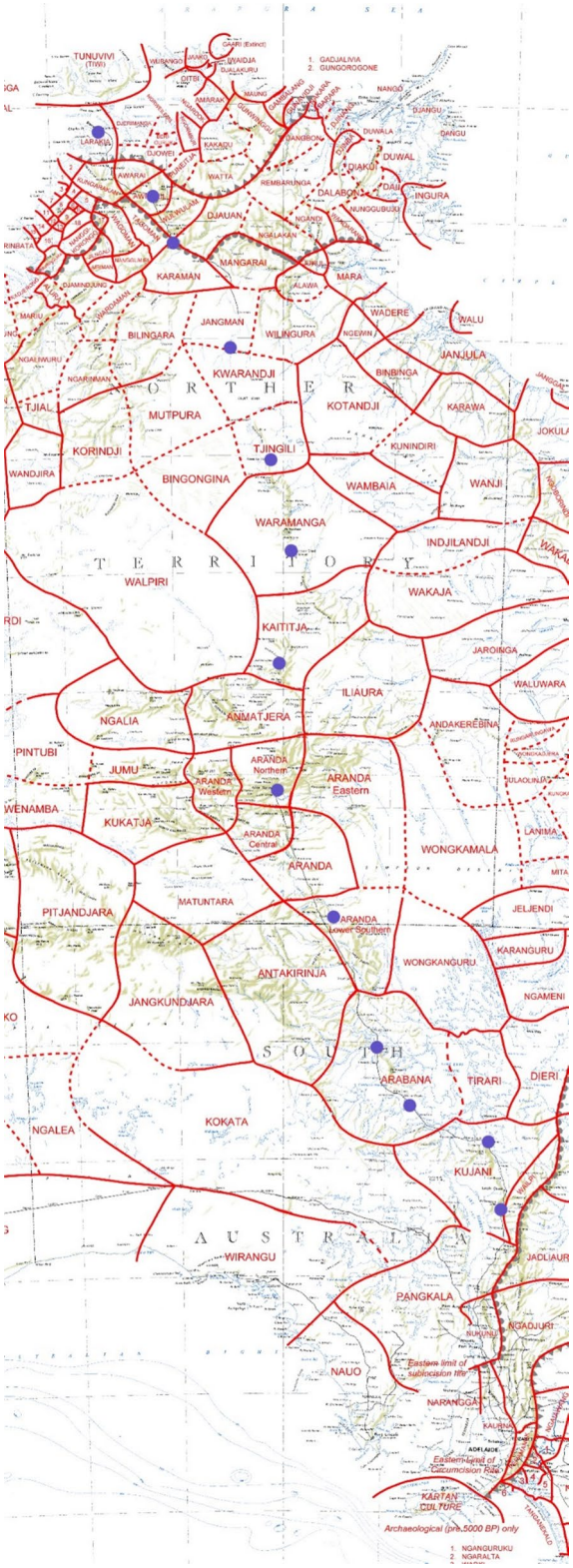

Figure 1. Detail of N. B. Tindale's 1974 map of Aboriginal group territories, with Overland Telegraph stations marked. (S.A. Museum)

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by attempts at engagement, with the principal aim of acquiring metal, cloth, leather and other commodities and materials, such as porcelain insulators.[i]

To summarise, along its length and throughout its first decade of existence, Aboriginal reactions to the Overland Telegraph Line tend to fall into three main categories: wariness or aversion; confrontation and attempts to drive the intruders out; and engagement focused upon the acquisition of European objects and materials. The encounters documented in the journals and correspondence of explorers and the Overland Telegraph employees range between these three categories. These responses were all prefigured at various stages of Stuart's expeditions from 1860 to 1863.

From Wariness to Engagement during Stuart's Expeditions

Stuart enlisted Aboriginal guides during his first and third expeditions, but neither initiative was successful. He soon found that the guides' expertise and confidence evaporated once they travelled beyond their own countries, so that, for his final push north during his last three expeditions through the Centre, he relied almost entirely on his own bush skills, while also paying close attention to Aboriginal smokes and other signs of their presence (Bailey, 2006, p. 45, p. 114). As for the attitude of Aboriginal people themselves during these expeditions, the historian Mervyn Hartwig's analysis of more than twenty separate encounters suggests that the dominant reaction by the isolated individuals and groups encountered by Stuart was 'fear and avoidance', rather than confrontation or a closer engagement (Hartwig, 1965, p. 243). As Hartwig put it, 'Stuart travelled too quickly for them to overcome their fears' (Hartwig, 1965, p. 243).

Stuart was well aware that his progress through Aboriginal land was often monitored. He saw evidence of this in the smokes sent up by hidden observers, signalling his party's presence to others, and in footprints through his old camps when he had cause to retrace parts of his route. As a general rule this avoidance suited Stuart very well, for he had formed a view during his first expedition (to the west of Lake Torrens in 1858) that little would be gained by close contact with Aboriginal people. Misunderstandings resulting from such contact could easily jeopardise his project.

Even at this early stage, though, there was evidence of curiosity; Aboriginal people shadowing Stuart's party were aware Stuart and his men carried objects and material of great interest. In June 1860, for example, two Warumungu men visited Stuart's camp at Kekwick Ponds, presenting him with parrots, a possum and some 'mice'. In turn, Stuart wrote, they were ready 'to steal everything they could lay their fingers on' (Hartwig, 1965, pp. 243–244; *Adelaide Observer*, 1897). Hartwig scanned the evidence from Stuart's last three expeditions for shifts in behaviour and response to the explorer's presence. He found that instances of 'resistance or

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incipient resistance' rose as Aboriginal people became more familiar with the explorer's movements – and became aware that Stuart had no intention of observing the standard Aboriginal protocols when entering or passing through their country. 'Resistance' suggests a reaction to an originating force; perhaps it is more accurate to describe the Aboriginal response as akin to opportunistic guerrilla warfare, more attuned to evicting the interlopers, with the associated aim of acquiring exotic materials. There were several instances of attempts to fire the grass to the windward of the party, and Stuart encountered a full-scale attack with spears and boomerangs at Attack Creek on his fourth expedition, convincing him to turn back to Adelaide (Bailey, 2006, pp. 157–160). More attacks were experienced during the final expedition.

Hartwig concludes that by the last of his six expeditions Stuart had become 'more ready to resort to force and less willing to make careful and time-consuming efforts at conciliation' (Hartwig, 1965, pp. 246–247). That may be so, but it is worth remembering that during that sequence of expeditions Aboriginal people along those routes had come to know at least some aspects of European behaviour, and a few English words and phrases. Having established that basis, their access to European goods would now be easier, either through theft or exchange. As visits by Aboriginal men to his camps increased in frequency, Stuart's patience became strained. The 1860 Attack Creek incident had been preceded a few days earlier by offers of food by Warumungu men. Stuart ordered them out of the camp, as he realised that their main aim was to acquire items of equipment, to which, as hosts to the white visitors, they felt entitled. In this instance an armed confrontation was the result, but that did not always follow; other forms of engagement were possible. During Stuart's final expedition, another encounter took place at Attack Creek, in which simple curiosity played its part. William Auld recalled it, years later:

> At Attack Creek Thring and I were washing some of our scanty wardrobe, about 200 yards [180 metres] from camp, when suddenly a tall blackfellow made his appearance. He came up to us, and after talking and making signs he untied the lace of my boot. Then I made signs to him to take it off, which he did, and he gave a whistle. Next he took off the stocking, gave another whistle, and tried to peel off more. I made signs to him to replace them, which he did, doing up the lace and tying it in a bow the same as it was before. He seemed much astonished at the whole process. We packed up our clothes, bade him a most polite good-day, and returned to camp (Auld, 1891, p. 6).

This 'tall blackfellow' may well have been one of the party attacking Stuart a year earlier. Auld's anecdote offers a reminder that public, corporate protocols of encounter might differ considerably from those applying in more personal or intimate circumstances. Hartwig's analysis suggests that those less formal, more spontaneous encounters increased as Aboriginal

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people began to see the Europeans as a resource to be exploited, rather than as invaders to be implacably turned away. The Overland Telegraph project would soon offer a test of that model.

The Overland Telegraph Line: Impact & Effect

Wariness or avoidance was not confined to the Aboriginal people encountered by Europeans along the line. Charles Todd himself had framed his instructions to the Telegraph reconnaissance and construction parties with the intention that there should be as little contact as possible with Aboriginal people. It is certainly likely that he formed this view after discussions with Stuart in Adelaide, but his approach was also directly influenced by the course of events near Port Darwin during the 1869 Goyder Survey Expedition. Surveyor J. W. O. Bennett was drawn into a reciprocal relationship with a group of Wulna men at his survey camp close to the Adelaide River. A keen philologist, Bennett compiled the earliest vocabulary of the Wulna language and attended Wulna ceremonies. He was subsequently speared to death by the Aboriginal men with whom he 'fraternised' (Jones, 2007). The accepted explanation for his death was that it was a direct consequence of his fraternisation. For Todd this was a lesson learnt, and was directly reflected in his instructions to the telegraph construction parties, drafted in the months following Bennett's death. His 'Instructions to Overseers in Charge of Works' (1870) contained the following relevant clauses ("Instructions", 1870):

> *39. Treatment of Natives.* - Should any natives be met with, they must be treated kindly but firmly. No native must be allowed to come within 100 yards of the Camp without permission from the officer in charge, and then not more than three at any one time.
>
> *40. Not to visit Native Camp without leave.* - No one is to be allowed to visit the natives' camp without special permission; and, in all cases, previous intimation is to be given to the natives.
>
> *41. No Communication with Native Women.* - The officer in charge is especially cautioned to allow of no communication between any of his party and the native women, or of any conduct likely to create jealousy on the part of the natives. This is not to apply to any woman engaged by him, in the absence of a man, as a guide to point out the situation of water.
>
> *42. Property of Natives not to be touched.* - If a native camp, or burial ground, is met with, the property of the natives, it is to be left untouched. If any natives are seen, they must be warned by cooeying of the approach of a white man, as their first impulse of terror at the unaccustomed sight often leads them to throw their spears at him.
>
> *43. Mode of Attack by Natives.* - When natives attack a party, they generally do it by setting fire to the grass, and approaching under cover of the flames and smoke. It is therefore desirable, when deciding upon a camping place where there are signs of the presence of natives, to bear this in mind, and either choose a place where the grass is scanty, or burn a piece round the intended camp. Under these circumstances, it could be well to choose a good position commanding the surrounding country, and where, for say 100 yards around, there is no shelter for a black to creep unseen towards the camp.
>
> *44. Not to Fire upon Natives except in cases of necessity. Statement of affray to be drawn up.* – It is most strictly forbidden to fire upon the natives except in the last extremity, when it may become necessary for the safety of the party; and in such a case a statement is to be drawn up by the officer in charge, detailing all the circumstances which led to this action, together with all subsequent occurrences, and this statement must be supplemented by the written evidence of such men as were present at the time, duly signed by them. These documents are to be forwarded to the Superintendent of Telegraphs by the first opportunity.

It is worth noting that none of the relevant clauses touched on the key reason for Aboriginal people's attraction to the line party camps – the commodities and resources which those

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parties had brought onto Aboriginal lands. Todd appeared to overlook this factor completely. In fact, he rather naively considered that the Line held no attractions for Aboriginal people, and might even repel them. In November 1872, as the chain of eleven telegraph stations began sending and receiving Morse code messages, Todd was interviewed in Adelaide. He was asked about the risks posed by Aboriginal groups. By that time, he was certainly aware of a rising incidence of clashes, although his parties had generally been able to work unimpeded. The journalist put his response in this way: 'Mr Todd does not apprehend much trouble in dealing with the natives, for although numerous in places they have a wholesome dread of the white man' ("The Trans-Continental Telegraph", 1872).

That 'wholesome dread' may have been cultivated to some extent by Todd himself. Two years earlier, in November 1870, Todd was at the Peake, planning the Line with his assistant, Benjamin Herschel Babbage (himself an explorer and scientist). According to the journal of linesman T. F. Smith, Todd and Babbage were experimenting with the telegraph batteries, required to send the electrical charge along the line to the next repeater stations at Strangways Springs to the south and Charlotte Waters to the north. Todd was particularly interested to see whether he could demonstrate the charge for Aboriginal people at the Peake, so that they would understand that the Line was dangerous and should be avoided. According to linesman Smith, the batteries had achieved this effect: 'He [Todd] practised or operated on them once, but he drove them clear from here. His object was to frighten them from touching or interfering with the wire when hung for communication' (Smith, 1870).

This was not the first time Todd had used this technique to send a message to Aboriginal people that the telegraph wire was dangerous. Following his lecture of 28 January 1863 to Adelaide's Philosophical Society promoting the Overland Telegraph Line project, it was suggested by F. G. Waterhouse, a member of Stuart's successful expedition, that Todd might expect trouble with Aborigines. Todd's response was that he had a solution for that problem: 'When I laid the cable at Lake Alexandrina', he recalled, 'I gave a blackfellow an electric shock, and ever since they avoid the wires most religiously. (A laugh)' (Philosophical Society, 1863, p. 6). In a further response Todd made the reductive simplicity of his approach clear: 'the best protection of the line against the natives would be by working on their superstitions' (Philosophical Society. 1863, p. 8).

Such indications might suggest that Todd had no meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people, and perhaps a low opinion of them. That is difficult to gauge, but it does appear that he felt a duty to record details about Aboriginal people, and there is evidence that he promoted this approach among telegraph staff, particularly in the Line's central section. Todd gathered a 101-word vocabulary of Southern Arrernte at the Peake Telegraph Station during his visits there, and submitted it to the ethnographer E. M. Curr's 1886–1887 compilation of Aboriginal

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vocabularies (Curr, 1886–1887). Curr published at least seven other vocabularies gathered by telegraph staff at stations between the Peake and Tennant Creek. It is likely that Todd encouraged those contributions, which suggests Todd had some expectation of the contribution the telegraph stations might make to Australian science. It is also an indication that Todd's non-fraternisation policy no longer applied once the telegraph stations were operational.

Todd assumed that non-fraternisation would prevent conflict during the construction phase. His instructions were framed accordingly, but as Aboriginal people began focusing their attention on the metal objects found so plentifully in the camps of the white fellows, and as telegraph staff began taking in interest in Aboriginal language, the non-fraternisation policy appeared increasingly irrelevant. But within an eighteen-month period following the Line's successful inauguration in August 1872, three telegraph stations came under concerted attack. Before that wave of attacks began, Todd was confident enough to downplay any risk to his project, stating publicly in November 1872 that:

> The blacks are not troublesome, nor do I think it likely they ever will be. If they are kept at a proper distance, and no injury is done, then they will apparently never do any harm nor even attempt It; but should the whites despoil them in any way, or give them cause to think themselves wronged, there can be no doubt the savage spirit will crop out quickly. It therefore depends on management, and so far as it is possible to foresee in such a matter I am inclined to think the men who will be left here and at the other stations I have visited quite understand the position, and will act with care and judgement ("The Transcontinental Telegraph: Public Recognition", 1872).

Todd had sufficient evidence to suggest that the basis for this reassurance may not have been solid. Even with well organised camps and his rigorous policy of non-fraternisation, there had been numerous cases of Aboriginal people raiding stores and temporarily unoccupied camps and wagons, removing caches of wire, telegraph insulators and even the footplates of telegraph poles. Todd himself had acquired three Aboriginal axes fashioned from those cast-iron footplates. He passed one of these axes to the Adelaide collector, Dr A. H. Davis, who inscribed it with the following text (and see Figure 2):

> Tomahawk made by the natives at Newcastle Waters on the Northern Line, from the footplate of an iron telegraph pole. The natives dug up the pole, broke the footplate and formed it into several tomahawks like this one. They sharpened it. Given me by C. Todd, C.M.G., S.A. 1884.[ii]

Once broken, porcelain telegraph insulators provided the ideal material for fashioning spear-points and knives. In April 1873 one of the Line maintenance workers, Charles Johnston (later a telegraph station-master), came upon three Aboriginal men near Katherine, 'at a case of

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insulators which they had broken open and were employed breaking them up' (Johnston, 1873). By the 1890s the telegraph operator and pioneer anthropologist, Francis Gillen, found it necessary to place another favoured material, glass from broken bottles, at the foot of telegraph poles, to prevent the insulators being smashed (Jones, 2017, p. xvi).

Figure 2. Axe fashioned from an iron footplate of a telegraph pole at Newcastle Waters, originally in Charles Todd's collection. (A3941, S.A. Museum)

Surveyor Christopher Giles accompanied the initial exploration parties sent out by Todd to reconnoitre the Line's route through Central Australia. Giles was appointed as the first telegraph station-master at Charlotte Waters. His memoir confirmed an increasing focus by Aboriginal people on European commodities:

> … at first we saw but little of the natives, though we had good reason to know that they saw a great deal of us. Axes began to disappear in a mysterious way, and the men's clothes, hung out on bushes to dry, near the camp, would be missing in the morning. A large and heavy tarpaulin, brand new, vanished also and was never seen again. Though I never saw the missing axes again, I often saw traces of them. When piloting a cutting party to the Finke for poles I frequently found that the natives had been there before us cutting down saplings with our own axes, to make weapons with (Giles, 1894).

Todd also appointed Christopher Giles's brother, Alfred, to John Ross's exploratory expedition to fix the Line's route through the MacDonnell Ranges. Alfred Giles made similar observations on the growing Aboriginal interest in European infrastructure and *materiel*, noting that any stray metal object was readily souvenired if not watched carefully during Aboriginal visits to their camps. On 3 June 1871, Giles and his party passed an unattended wagon 200 miles [320 km] south of Darwin, 'nearly new and perfectly sound'. Five weeks later, on 6 July, Giles noted

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that 'it was a perfect wreck, cut and hacked about, all iron bolts and clamps having been carried away by the savages [*sic*], who prized any iron or metal work, and converted it into knives, tomahawk blades, and spear-points' (Giles, 1995, p. 85, p. 92; Jones, 2007, pp. 91–129).

Figure 3. James Harvey's watercolour drawing of an attack on John Ross's advance exploration party in the MacDonnell Ranges, July 1870. (AA402, S.A. Museum)

Christopher Giles himself did not spend long wondering about the fate of his men's purloined clothing. Leading a pole-cutting party to the Finke he came across a 'native granary', consisting of a number of different grains stored in large bags on a tree platform. These large bags were of closely woven fibre string, but on examination Giles discovered that these in turn contained smaller bags 'constructed from the legs of our trousers and sleeves of our shirts, tied up at each end and filled with seeds'. Giles left the bags intact and investigated further, unwrapping a parcel containing a 50-metre length of possum-fur string and a 150-metre length of human hair string. At the centre of the parcel was a glass marble and a piece of engraved pearl shell. This was, as Giles put it, 'a curious example of extremes meeting. Here was a boy's marble from Adelaide, handed on and bartered from tribe to tribe, perhaps twenty or thirty years ago, and side by side with a pearl shell from the extreme north coast, obtained originally likely from the Malays' (Giles, 1894).[iii]

Christopher Giles was one of the few Overland Telegraph diarists to offer a view of the Aboriginal perspective on the Line and what it offered. He had also noted another phenomenon – that of Aboriginal people making their own versions of the telegraph line itself. 'I have also several times been amused', he wrote, 'by seeing where the native children had been playing by putting up telegraph lines on the broad sandy bed of the river [Finke] by

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ranging long sticks in a line' (Giles, 1894). This suggests that Aboriginal children at the Finke had already adjusted to the Line's presence, but their construction was not the only one of its kind. Richard Knuckey, in charge of the southern section of the Line's construction, had also observed 'mock' telegraph lines, but noted that these had been erected by adult men. The Line's supply wagons 'used to lay a coil of wire at the foot of the posts at certain intervals, and several times we found that the Aborigines … had imitated our work by fastening long lengths of wire from bush to bush for miles, about the scrub' ("A veteran bushman", 1914). This was not simple imitation for its own sake, as with the Finke children. Was there a link between the 150 metres of human hair string discovered by Giles, possibly used to construct ceremonial headgear, and the intentions of those stringing the telegraph wire across the landscape? Had Aboriginal people perceived a link between stringing the wire and the regular appearance of wagon-loads of provisions and desirable goods? How did Aboriginal people comprehend the phenomenon of an apparently endless wire, stretching from one horizon to another, erected by teams of men and strange animals, as if in preparation for an extraordinary ceremony?

What is suggested by these abstractions of material from the Line is a determination by Aboriginal people to turn the presence of Europeans and their commodities to their own account, rather than to necessarily adopt any 'civilising' practices or tendencies. The apparent sociality displayed by Aboriginal people on approaching the telegraph camps was only partly founded in curiosity about the Europeans themselves. The key motivation or attractor was metal, cloth, leather, flour and, later, tobacco. Undoubtedly, many of the Arrernte, Kaytej and Warumungu artefacts which made their way to the South Australian Museum collection from those early years of contact along the Line were acquired in exchange for those commodities.

In the meantime, Todd's directives to his men to minimise contact with Aboriginal people inevitably had the effect of constricting the supply of desired European commodities in the face of increasing Aboriginal demand. Surviving diaries and correspondence suggest that, where the telegraph parties adhered to Todd's instructions, relations with Aboriginal people were smooth, during the construction phase at least. From the point of view of the overseers for each section of the Line, the instructions had the benefit of clarity and the ring of common sense. Aboriginal visits to the construction camps were often difficult to manage, with Europeans attempting to treat their visitors with respect, while scrutinising their every move. Reporting from Charlotte Waters, Richard Knuckey put it in these terms: 'The natives gave no trouble beyond displaying some tendency towards kleptomania' ("The Overland Telegraph", 1871). The simplest thing was to follow Todd's directive, and to enforce a hundred-yard [90-metre] exclusion zone around the camps. This also had the effect of heightening tension. By the time that most of the fortified telegraph stations were constructed to Todd's design, Aboriginal men were prepared to run the risk of attacking the stations.

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That pressure began to build as soon as the construction phase was completed, when the chain of telegraph stations began operation, each staffed by fewer than a dozen men, with occasional maintenance teams travelling up and down the Line. In this early period, from their construction until the late 1870s, the telegraph stations were operated essentially as fortified redoubts. The attack on the Barrow Creek station in February 1874 is often seen as an isolated event, but it was not the only station to have experienced a frontal attack. At least two other attacks, at Charlotte Waters and Tennant Creek, seem to have gone unreported in official channels. In mid-April 1871, when most of the staff at Charlotte Waters had moved north to erect the line, a group of twenty armed Southern Arrernte men saw their chance to gain access to the station store, guarded only by three men. 'They commenced a kind of war dance', Knuckey wrote, 'and then made signs for us to be off and leave the place, or they would spear us' (Knuckey, quoted in Giles, 1894, p. 22). The attack was repelled, but it is clear that the phase of 'fear and avoidance' had passed. 'Evidently they are getting accustomed to us', Knuckey wrote, 'and seeing that we are on our guard against thieving, think that they can conquer us by force' (Giles, 1894, p. 22). Christopher Giles detailed a similar account of a foiled attack at the Goyder Creek, in which a group of Aboriginal men sat together at a distance from a small encampment of line workers, and worked their way gradually closer:

> These natives, about 15 in number, were all in reality well armed, and had adopted their usual plan of trailing their spears along the ground, holding them between their toes. Besides this – also according to their custom – they had bundles of spears 'planted' in the grass (Giles, 1894, p. 23).

On 21 January 1873, the Tennant Creek telegraph station had also experienced a frontal attack, by 50–60 Warumungu men armed with spears and boomerangs. The station was only a three-room timber structure at that time, but the telegraph officers were armed and had sufficient warning to be able to fire on the Warumungu, who 'retired in haste', with unspecified casualties. Perhaps the lesson learnt by Aboriginal men here was to choose a more advantageous time to mount an attack, when the officers were distracted and away from their firearms. The Barrow Creek telegraph station was attacked by Kaytej warriors under such conditions, a little over a year later, on 23 February 1874. The attack came at dusk as John Stapleton, the station-master, played the violin for his staff on the station verandah. On both the day of the attack and on the preceding day, apparently unarmed Kaytej men had approached the station asking for flour and had been refused. It is possible that these men may have given notice, or at least a hint, of the impending attack, in which two of the staff, Stapleton and the cook, John Franks, were fatally wounded and an Aboriginal member of the staff, Jemmy (probably from the Peake) was badly injured. The remaining staff were able to drive the attackers away with gunfire, resulting in the deaths of several Kaytej men (Jones,

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2017, pp. 127–130). Reprisals quickly followed, led by the police-trooper (and ethnographer of the Diyari people) Samuel Gason, who had been at the station during the attack. Estimates of Kaytej and Anmatyerre deaths in these reprisals range from 30 to 90 men, women and children (Hartwig, 1965, pp. 272–276). These numbers can only be estimated, partly because the South Australian government had effectively relinquished oversight, allowing local officials to pursue retributive justice without accountability.

The Barrow Creek affair and its aftermath signalled that the ground had shifted in terms of Aboriginal and European relationships along the telegraph line. On the European side, the ideal of 'conciliation' now seemed impossible to promote or defend. Stapleton had been known for his interest in Aboriginal culture, and, like the surveyor Bennett, this interest and sympathy was judged to have been a factor in the attack on the station. It was broadly concluded in newspaper editorials that the 'white man's kindness' was interpreted by Aboriginal people as a sign of weakness.

More attacks were to follow. By 1875, a year after the Barrow Creek killings and reprisals, a traveller reported that a 'large board … with the hand-written warning "Beware of Natives"' had been fixed to a tree about 150 kilometres south of the station, 'as the hostile district is supposed to commence about there' ("Central Australian Notes", 1875). In that year, an overlanding party led by Alfred Giles was attacked by Warumungu warriors between the Gibson and Hayward Creeks and at least two Warumungu were shot. That pattern was repeated in April 1875, when two employees of the Daly Waters telegraph station were speared to death by Aboriginal men at the Roper River. When pastoralists began stocking their newly acquired leases in the MacDonnell Ranges during the early 1880s, Aboriginal men understandably regarded cattle and sheep, grazing on their ancestral land, as fair game. Violence and reprisals increased, and it is reasonable to consider this escalation as resulting directly from the Overland Telegraph Line.

In his reminiscences of the Overland Telegraph Line's construction, Christopher Giles reflected on how easily Aboriginal people might have driven the telegraph parties out of their country:

> It is to me still a wonder that it never occurred to these natives to cut off our retreat from the country by spearing our horses and bullocks. These were turned out every night in hobbles, and would wander to a distance of perhaps two or three miles [3–5 km] from the camp, and how exceedingly easy a prey they would have proved can readily be imagined… It is passing strange that while they did not hesitate to attack our sacred persons, they should have avoided a safe, easy, and certain method of placing us in extreme peril, if not of cutting us off entirely, by destroying the animals which

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> had carried us here, by which alone we could pursue our work, and on which we relied to carry us away when our task was ended (Giles, 1894, p. 20).

The construction of the fortified telegraph stations, largely complete by the late 1870s, signalled a decisive shift in power relations. The Line with its chain of stations was now a hard and permanent reality, and as Hartwig relates, this accompanied a shift towards a more concerted policy of pacification and paternalism. By this time, the consensus in academic circles and the popular press was that Aboriginal people were primitive examples of mankind, hardly capable of improvement and likely to perish as a casualty in the contemporary struggle for existence. The best course was to provide succour in accordance with Christian ethics, while guarding against the perceived duplicity of Aboriginal people. In all the discourse around the 'Aboriginal problem', the people themselves tended to be characterised as 'savages' and therefore as children. The paternalism implied by this attitude found its expression in the ration distribution network, as it gradually extended from South Australia to the Northern Territory, via the Overland Telegraph Line's stations. Rations were eventually dispensed from the telegraph stations, but apparently not until the beginning of the twentieth century, despite South Australia's own commitment to ration stations for needy and displaced Aboriginal people as early as the 1850s.[iv] Charles Todd did not want his efficient system jeopardised, and issued instructions 'that natives should only be supplied with food in return for work done, or in case of sickness and infirmity' ("Supplies to Natives", 1874). Two phrases were later coined to refer to the period which followed — 'culture of dependency' and 'intelligent parasitism' (Rowse, 1998; Elkin, 1951). Both relate to the shift from a period in which Aboriginal people camped at the telegraph stations for short periods while maintaining a life centred on hunting and gathering, to an era in which sedentism and dependency began to take hold.

Under these circumstances the telegraph stations took on a new role, as neutral zones in an increasingly adverse environment for Aboriginal people. The stations also offered a limited source of employment and a means by which individual Aboriginal people could gain some of the skills required to make a living on the fringe of the emerging European economy. Much depended on the goodwill of individual telegraph station operators. When we think of the Overland Telegraph and the staff who worked at the eleven repeater stations, each separated from the other by 250 km of forbidding country, we tend to gain an impression of isolated individuals, committed to one task, that of receiving and sending messages. In fact, many of these men had already displayed a curiosity about the world which led them to these remote localities. Christopher Giles was an example. In later life he became 'a recognised authority on the writings in the Koran and in the Greek Testament' ("The Late Mr Christopher Giles", 1917). At Charlotte Waters in 1875 he contributed the first published vocabulary of Arrernte to George Taplin's *Folklore, Manners, Customs, and Languages of the South Australian*

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Aborigines (1879) and collected botanical specimens for the Victorian botanist Ferdinand von Mueller. It is likely that Giles exerted a formative influence on the young Francis Gillen, who joined the staff at Charlotte Waters in 1875.

Gillen accumulated insights into Central Australian Aboriginal culture and became a crucial link between the remote Australian bush and the centres of international discourse about the origins of religious belief, totemism and kinship (Jones, 2017). After Gillen's transfer to Alice Springs in 1890, he met the Director of the South Australian Museum, Edward Stirling, and subsequently became a key figure in the Horn Scientific Exploration Expedition of 1894. Gillen's insights into Arrernte cosmology and his partnership with Walter Baldwin Spencer soon brought the Arrernte into international focus. These insights were possible because of the trust he had established with the Arrernte at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, particularly after he had used his position as stipendiary magistrate to arrest the senior police-trooper in Central Australia, W. H. Willshire, for the murder of Aboriginal people at a nearby cattle station (Jones, 2017, pp. xiv–xv).

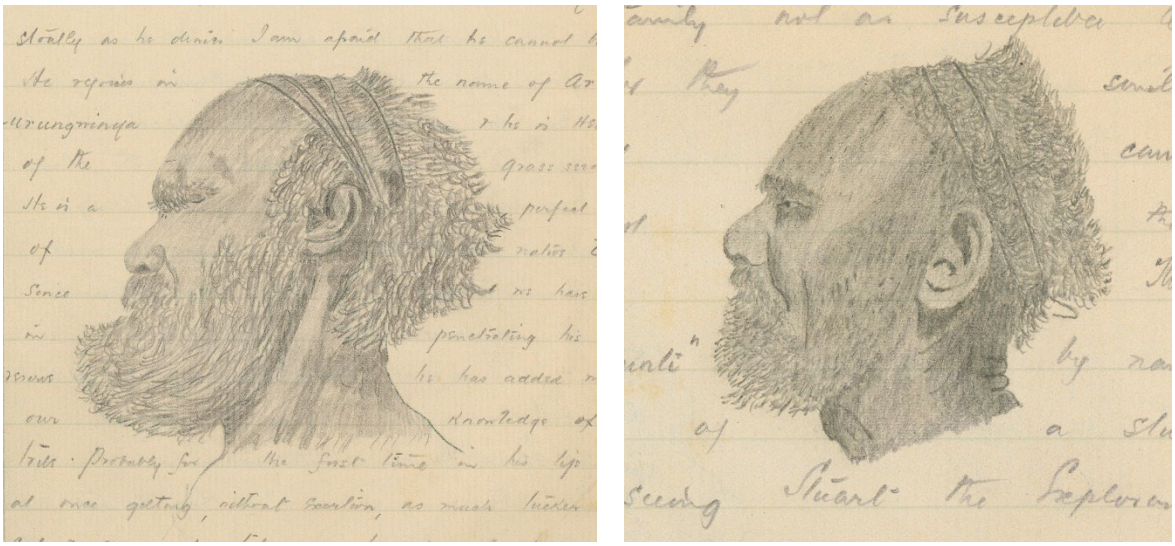

Figure 4. F. J. Gillen's 1901 pencil sketches. *Left:* Tungilla, a Kaytej man involved in the 1874 attack on the Barrow Creek telegraph station. *Right:* Murramunti, a Warumungu man who recalled seeing the explorer McDouall Stuart, fifty years earlier. (PRG54, State Library of South Australia)

As the historian John Mulvaney has noted, the Horn Expedition had a transformative effect on telegraph station staff in Central Australia. Gillen wrote to Spencer in December 1894 that 'every member of the staff' at Alice Springs, is anxious to contribute something to your collection' (Gillen, 1897). This was not confined to Alice Springs. Paddo Byrne at Charlotte Waters continued to engage Aboriginal collectors to seek out zoological specimens for Spencer, and for Stirling at the Adelaide Museum. Stirling was an especial beneficiary; being the first to scientifically describe the marsupial mole from specimens collected by Aboriginal people at Charlotte Waters. His later knighthood hinged partly on that discovery. James Field at

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Tennant Creek also provided specimens, as did Frank Scott at Barrow Creek. All of these men were able to compare notes on their discoveries and, while the Aboriginal collectors may not have understood exactly how it was that their familiar animals were now so appealing to Europeans, we have the sense of a common project, bearing on the land itself. Gillen's exuberance and enthusiasm seemed to spread up and down the Line. Stirling tapped that enthusiasm, and his form letter to telegraph station operators and police, seeking artefacts for the South Australian Museum before, like Todd's axe, they were transformed by modernity, resulted in the most significant and wide-ranging collection of Central Australia material culture.

The Overland Telegraph Line was an extraordinary and unprecedented infrastructure project without doubt, but it was more than that. For a small group of like-minded Europeans, working with Aboriginal people whose knowledge and traditions opened up new fields, the Line became a line of enquiry, a means of generating knowledge about an unfamiliar and confronting landscape and its people. As for the Aboriginal people, the Line was a vector, a means of obtaining material benefit and entirely new technologies which could be adapted, in the first instance, to their existing material culture. Any benefit to Aboriginal people from the Telegraph Line, though, would come at a price: a loss of land and autonomy, together with a massive fracture in the social fabric. This damage would become most apparent in the years which followed the construction of the telegraph stations, beyond the scope of this paper.

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Endnotes

[i] John McDouall Stuart led six expeditions into inland Australia from 1858, culminating in the successful transcontinental crossing of 1861–1862. See Serle (1949) and Bailey (2006).

[ii] Register entry for A3941, South Australian Museum. For an Aboriginal account of the destruction of a telegraph pole in order to obtain the iron footplate for use as an axe, see Koch & Koch (1993), pp. 20–21.

[iii] Christopher Giles was unaware that the pearl shell was likely to have originated from the Kimberley coast, the source for an ancient Aboriginal trade network circulating such objects into the Western Desert. The marble may well have originated in Adelaide.

[iv] See, for example: https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/subjects/aboriginal-ration-depots

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