

Charles Todd and the Overland Telegraph Line

A Book Review of “Mr Todd’s Marvel”

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Abstract: Adam Courtenay, an Australian author and journalist completed *Mr Todd’s Marvel: How one man telegraphed Australia to the modern world*, a recent book on Charles Todd and the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL), in time for it to be published around the 150th anniversary of the completion of the historic project. Although the book concentrates on the immense task and challenges of building the OTL from Port Augusta to Palmerston (now called Darwin), it does provide a focus on the people that participated and, especially, on the special role of Charles Todd. This book review concludes that the book is a useful introduction to the subject, with occasional inclusions of information that might not be well known, and permits the reader easy access to the subject through its narrative style and generous spread of illustrations.

However, the book does have limitations. It lacks an index and citations detailed enough to be followed up. For the reader who might wish to pursue particular issues or events, these limitations are frustrating indeed. Overall, it is for the general reader, rather than for those seeking to gain an even deeper understanding of the times, the project, and the major participants and their motivations.

Keywords: Charles Todd, Overland Telegraph Line, Australian telecommunications

Introduction

Mr Todd’s Marvel ([Courtenay, 2023](#)) is the latest book on the substantial Victorian-era infrastructure achievement, the building of the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL) that connected Port Augusta (and Adelaide) to Palmerston, as Darwin was then known, and so connected Australia to the cable systems that were being deployed in the British Empire, Europe and America. The book is written in a readable style by Adam Courtenay, a Sydney-based author and journalist.

Unlike some other recent books on Todd, such as *Beyond the Legend: The Many Worlds of Charles Todd* by Denis Cryle ([Cryle, 2017](#)), which was reviewed in the *Journal* ([Holmes, 2018](#)),

this book is not a biography as such, but focusses very much on the OTL. It was timed by the author to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the completion of the OTL in August 2022, although it was published in 2023.

My interest is what the book says that is new and worthwhile about Todd and his achievement that has not been said or covered already.

Structure

The book is fairly short at 197 pages, including a foreword by a descendant of Charles Todd and a useful bibliography. It includes a lot of illustrations. Regrettably there are no detailed citations. The book is set out chronologically in 12 chapters plus an epilogue, in which Courtenay provides an overall assessment of Todd and the OTL and its significance for Australia's development. But we know from the outset, by the title and the subtitle ("How one man telegraphed Australia to the modern world"), something about that conclusion and the importance attributed to Todd himself.

Chapter 1: Not so Great Connections

Courtenay describes the celebrations in New York following the completion of a telegraphic cable across the Atlantic, and the receipt of the first transatlantic message from Queen Victoria to President James Buchanan. He relates the well-known story of how the cable failed some few weeks later ([Courtenay, 2023](#), p. 15): hence the chapter title.

At the same time, in Australia, John McDouall Stuart was exploring the northern and western regions seeking evidence of an inland sea in areas that had not been visited by Europeans. Stuart's explorations and maps subsequently became critical inputs for planning and building the OTL on a sustainable route.

Todd is introduced at the end of the chapter. He is credited with "understanding better than most" that "Stuart was paving the way for a great telegraph line that would connect Australia to the world" ([Courtenay, 2023](#), p. 21). This may well be the case, but Courtenay offers no citations to support his conclusion about Todd at this point. There are no footnotes or endnotes in the book at all, suggesting to this reviewer that it was intended only for the general reader.

Chapter 2: The Road to Adelaide

In this chapter, Courtenay describes Todd's background and his career in England where, by 1855, he was a 'supernumerary computer' working at the Royal Observatory at Greenwich ([Courtenay, 2023](#), p. 23). Todd's talents as a gifted mathematician and as a capable astronomer are mentioned, as well as his association with telegraph systems used to

coordinate and set timing for railway, navigation, and other applications. Courtenay does not dwell on this part of Todd's life, because, as mentioned already, this is not a biography of Todd.

Courtenay describes how the career opportunity in the colony of South Australia arose and how Todd came to be considered for it. The position was described as 'an observer' who was "qualified to make astronomical and meteorological observations, having some knowledge of the working of an electric telegraph, and competent to act as the head of a Department" (Courtenay, 2023, p. 23). Todd was not the first choice for the job. At the time he set sail for South Australia, in July 1855, neither Burke and Wills, nor Stuart, had commenced their explorations of the Australian outback, and long-distance telecommunications connecting the colonies to the world were well into the future.

Courtenay attributes to Todd a very early vision at this time to see a "telegraph string round the world", based on a speech said to have been made at his wedding (Courtenay, 2023, p. 33). Courtenay may well be right, but, unfortunately, he has provided no further evidence or citations on this point. What exactly drove Todd, and excited his curiosity and ambition, is important to understanding later events and his eventual success.

Chapter 3: The Hub of the South

Courtenay describes in this chapter the colony in Adelaide when Todd arrived, only 19 years after its foundation. He offers some interesting insights into the nature of the colony and how it differed from others in Australia. In less than 20 years the population had grown to 155,000 and it attracted "artisans and professionals who lacked opportunity in the mother country" (Courtenay, 2023, p. 35).

In 1855, Todd was both the Superintendent of Telegraphs and the colony's Astronomical Observer (Courtenay, 2023, p. 38). One of his first projects was to establish a government telegraph line from Adelaide to Port Adelaide and to buy out a private competitor (Courtenay, 2023, p. 39). The ACCC clearly did not exist then! The South Australian colonial network was then extended from Adelaide to other towns. In 1856, Todd agreed with his Victorian counterpart to jointly erect a telegraph line to Melbourne. This was completed in July 1858 (Courtenay, 2023, p. 42) and Adelaide could also connect via that link to Sydney.

Courtenay well describes the competition that was emerging in the plans for overseas connection. The main competition was from Queensland, which proposed to connect via Darwin to Batavia (Jakarta) and beyond. This started in 1858 and continued for the next 15 years, on and off. The failure of the transatlantic cable in 1858 led to a pause, as did the United States civil war.

Chapter 4: The Gaps begin to Close

Courtenay describes the advances in cable design and manufacture that occurred after the 1858 transatlantic failure. The section on how Todd managed to win the British Australia Telegraph Company (BAT) contract to build a telegraph line to connect with BAT's cable once landed in Darwin is particularly interesting, although there appears to be no new information or insights.

Chapters 5 to 11

These chapters make up the bulk of the book and are concerned with the monumental planning, logistics and construction tasks that Todd had to address in delivering the OTL in incredibly challenging circumstances. The challenges were not all from operating in barely explored and unexplored country far from white settlement. The poor management of the operation in the northern section is well described and the mutiny of the workers at critical times is mentioned. In addition, time was of the essence, because of the substantial penalties for exceeding deadlines in the BAT contract.

These chapters are well written and well supported with illustrations and appropriately detailed maps of the Southern, Northern and Central Sections into which Todd divided the project. Work proceeded more or less simultaneously on all three Sections to meet the contract timetable. In the event, the overall deadline was not met, and the overrun was around 6 months. Todd and South Australia were saved from substantial contractual penalties by the good fortune that BAT had failed to land a working cable on time in Port Darwin. Even so, the OTL budget was seriously exceeded. The actual expenditure was around £480,000 [about £21.0M or AUD 40.5M in 2024], four times Todd's original estimate (Courtenay, 2023, p. 164). Courtenay notes that "few complained" about this overrun, but provides no supporting evidence. He does, however, record that "within a year, South Australia had received £3,600 from local traffic charges and more than £12,000 from overseas cables" (Courtenay, 2023, p. 167). After operating costs, these revenues would seem to pale against the overrun. There were major economic benefits from the OTL and cable connectivity to overseas export markets, however, to which Courtenay refers (Courtenay, 2023, pp. 167 and 169).

The OTL Sections were finally connected up on 22 August 1872 at Frew Ponds Repeater Station between Daly Waters and Tennant Creek in the Northern Section. The line had to be cut and rejoined for the ceremony. Re-enactments for media coverage are clearly not 20th or 21st century inventions. I will not spoil by retelling Courtenay's wonderful and humorous description of the embarrassment that resulted when it was found that too much of the line had been cut and could not be readily rejoined (Courtenay, 2023, pp. 159–160).

At the end of Chapter 11, Courtenay offers a very useful but highly summarised account of what happened to Todd and what happened to the OTL after 1872. The OTL was duplicated in 1898 by a copper wire system and used for voice as well as telegraph services from 1925. The line was becoming increasingly redundant as the 20th century wore on ([Courtenay, 2023](#), pp. 169 and 171).

Chapter 12: The Great Incursion

The impact of the OTL and white settlements around the repeater stations on indigenous peoples is discussed in some detail in the last chapter. At first this looks like an afterthought, and it may have been that. However, it does deserve a separate chapter, because the timescales of European and indigenous interaction along the length of the OTL is different from the sequential approach of the preceding chapters, with their focus on the period from 1870 to 1872.

The most violent events at Barrow Creek in February 1874 are covered, including the further violence that followed and the punitive expedition which followed, resulting in atrocities against the Kaititja people ([Courtenay, 2023](#), pp. 183–184; see also [Jones, 2023](#)).

What We Learn of Todd

As already mentioned, Courtenay does not intend this book to be a biography of Todd, and refers to Denis Cryle as Todd's biographer ([Cryle, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, it is impossible for Courtenay not to convey something of Todd in the way Todd manages monumental tasks under very difficult circumstances. In the final section (not accorded chapter status) of the book, entitled 'Epilogue', Courtenay assesses Todd the man. He refers to Todd's wide range of abilities and interests from telegraphy to meteorology, astronomy, scientific endeavour generally, electricity and power generation, and other important issues of the day. He refers to Todd as selfless and self-deprecating, and not the least self-congratulatory ([Courtenay, 2023](#), p. 190). Courtenay considers that Todd was great also because "he had the common touch" and could get the best out of situations by "his ability to gently influence others for the greater good" ([Courtenay, 2023](#), p. 194).

Courtenay concludes: "Todd was a great leader capable of moving men and material across a continent. And that's the thing about great leaders — they never boast" ([Courtenay, 2023](#), p. 194).

What We Learn of the Overland Telegraph Line

I do not think that we learn anything new about the OTL from this book. It is a derivative work relying on much that has already been published, rather than a work describing new research

into new sources. It is still a good read and a tale well told for all that, and I believe that was the intention of the author.

Conclusion

I recommend this book as a sound retelling of the story of the OTL, including how it came to be a project of the Colonial Government of South Australia, the context in which it was conceived and won, and the challenges of its planning, delivery and operation. It is intended for the general reader rather than for the researcher or those with specialised interests associated with aspects of the topic. That probably explains the unfortunate lack of detailed citations. However, it does not explain the lack of an index.

References

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