

THE VIEW FROM THE BRAKEVAN

(Where we've been and where we're going).

In May 2020 I had released *The Overland - a Social History*. It was a project that I had commenced about a year before when the South Australian Government withdrew financial subsidy of the rail passenger service between Adelaide and Melbourne. The imminent cessation of the service suggested that it was time to write its history. The more I delved into that history I became increasingly aware of many injustices that had been dealt over the years. Through the book I put the case for making improvements to the service aimed at making it more attractive to travellers.

I had imagined that a book on *The Ghan* would be a comparable exercise. It has been a project that has taken on almost Herculean proportions.

It was just over a year ago that I sat down and jotted some chapter headings for this *Ghan* book. What we have now got is nothing like what I had set out to achieve. It is almost as if the 'scallywag of a train' has written its own story.

I am grateful to Mark Butler and his family for their involvement. It came as quite a surprise (and I think it was a surprise to Mark too) to discover that he was a descendant of Ernie Smith and thus, had a special connection to *The Ghan*.

Mark Butler has correctly identified rail as being on the 'cusp of global renaissance'. I agree with him and suspect he will agree with me that the development of such will require a firm commitment by both sides of politics to be in there for the long journey. It was a sad thing for Australia that the National Government set about achieving such in the 1970s and then a subsequent government in the 1990s tore it apart.

I see a future for fast trains between the major eastern capitals and servicing the larger regional centres. We are not talking about bullet trains but trains that operate at speeds about 160 kph. There will be some lines that will be dedicated routes for these fast trains but there will also be other routes over which fast trains and freight trains share the track. It is predictable that rail administrators will balk at the notion of fast passenger trains competing for paths of long freights at 115 kph. I see the Melbourne to Adelaide corridor fitting into this latter category.

These fast trains will be commuter trains – fast and frequent but also providing quality food and drink. And with all the 'bells and whistles' to allow one to make the carriage the office for a few hours. To use the example of the Adelaide to Melbourne corridor the fast trains will foster the development of regional centres such as Ararat, Horsham and Bordertown. People living in those communities will be able to travel to either capital, have a few hours to do their business and be back home all in the same day.

That model will not work for those travelling between Adelaide and Perth/Darwin.

That will be the territory of experiential trains like *The Ghan*, and the people who travel in them will not be in a hurry. The present *Ghan* carriages were built in the late 60s/early 70s and as they age it may be necessary to put speed restrictions on them. This too will give the rail administrators cause to balk by having their 115+kph mainlines clogged by experiential passenger trains dawdling along at 90 kph.

What is the *Ghan* going to look like in 30 years time? We must accept that the *Ghan* has long ceased to be a commuter train. Fresh air. Once upon a time carriages had windows that could be opened. The COVID experience will influence future carriage design. Those 1960s/1970s carriages were designed originally for the *Indian Pacific* that had a loading gauge imposed by tunnels and low overbridges. Could a future *Ghan* be specific to the generous loading gauge of the Adelaide to Darwin rail corridor and have double deck carriages and vista domes?

I am not absolutely certain, and will be open to challenge on the matter, that *The Ghan* is Australia's longest established named train. I can't identify any challengers from interstate.

The COVID-19 crisis shows no sign of abating and there will be no early opening of the international borders. I had written in October 2020 that 'Australians alone may not be enough to keep *The Ghan* in business'. Over to you, Australia!

John Wilson

20 June 2021

THE ROUTE

In 1872, South Australia completed the overland telegraph from Port Darwin to Adelaide, thereby establishing overseas communication. The route of the telegraph had followed the route that the explorer, John McDouall Stuart, had taken when crossing the continent in 1862. Stuart had followed a chain of artesian springs and water holes. Stuart's route had not passed through Alice Springs but had been about 30 km to the west.

In the wake of the success of the overland telegraph, South Australia set about building a railway from Adelaide to Port Darwin. Accordingly, a start was made at Port Augusta in 1878, with the railway reaching Farina in 1882. A connection to Adelaide was achieved at the same time as the opening of the railway to Farina.

Quorn became the Junction station of the Adelaide connection. The railway north from Port Augusta was a narrow gauge line. The Adelaide connection involved a break-of-gauge at Terowie, which was the rail head for the South Australian broad gauge system. From Farina the railway was extended to Hergott Springs in 1884.

Beyond Hergott Springs the railway was slowly extended in a north-west direction reaching Oodnadatta in 1891. That is where construction ceased because of adverse financial circumstances in South Australia.

Meanwhile a narrow gauge railway had been constructed from Palmerston (Port Darwin) to Pine Creek in the Northern Territory. That was opened in 1889. In 1911 the Commonwealth took over the railways from Port Augusta to Oodnadatta, and from Palmerston to Pine Creek. Under Commonwealth ownership Palmerston was renamed Darwin.

There was an extension of the North Australia Railway to Katherine as part of the development of Vestey's meatworks. Subsequently the Commonwealth extended that railway, first to Mataranka and then reaching Birdum in 1929. Construction had been authorised to Daly Waters but that extension did not proceed. Larrimah was a few miles north of Birdum. It was on the main highway and thus, became the point of transfer between road and rail. From an operational perspective it was the terminus of the North Australia Railway.

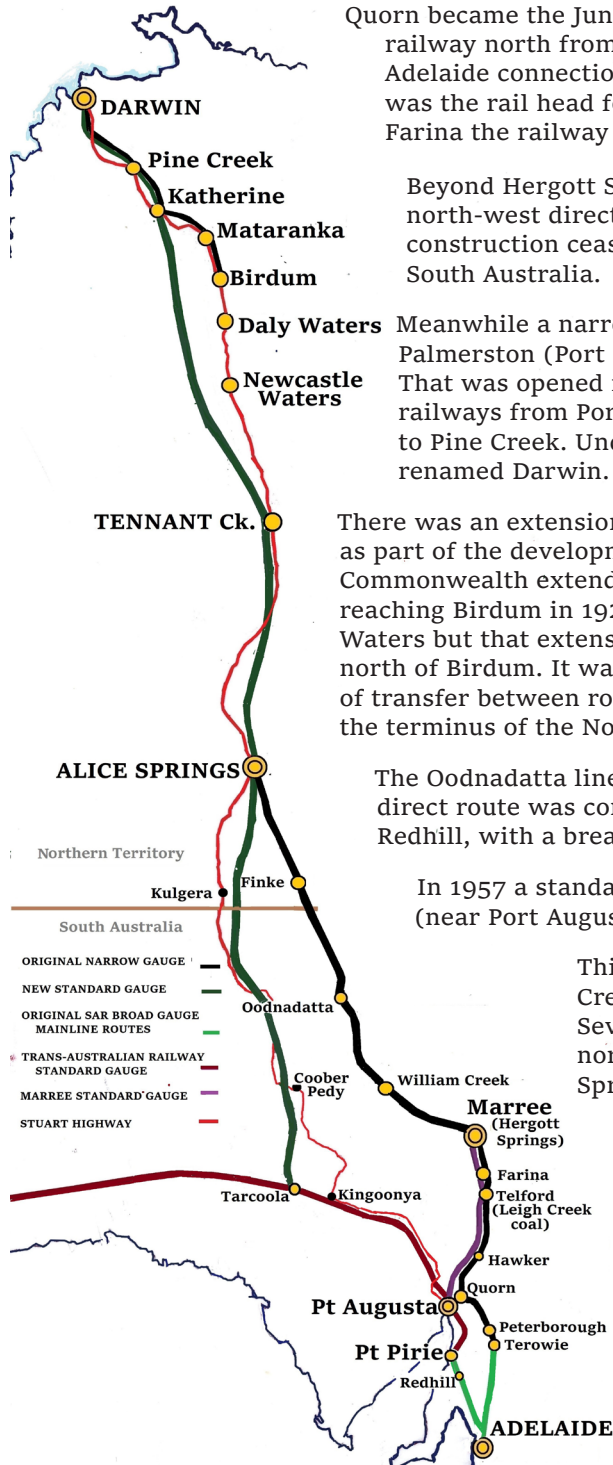
The Oodnadatta line was extended to Alice Springs in 1929. In 1937 a direct route was constructed between Adelaide and Port Augusta via Redhill, with a break-of-gauge at Port Pirie.

In 1957 a standard gauge railway was opened from Stirling North (near Port Augusta) to Marree (formerly Hergott Springs).

This railway was largely for the transport of Leigh Creek coal. Marree became a break-of-gauge location. Severe flooding in 1967 and 1974 affected the railway north of Oodnadatta and cut off supplies to Alice Springs for some months.

Accordingly, it was decided to build a standard gauge railway on a new alignment north from Tarcoola on the Trans-Australian Railway. That line was opened in October 1980. The narrow gauge line north of Marree was demolished. The standard gauge line north of Marree was demolished. Leigh Creek coal mine has closed and the railway from Stirling North is no longer used.

The final link, joining Darwin to the south was completed in 2004. That route takes a westerly route north of Tennant Creek and rejoins the alignment of the old narrow gauge railway.



A SYNOPSIS

- 3 **Foreword by Mark Butler MP Federal Member for Hindmarsh.** Mark has connections with railways, both past, present and future.
- 4 **The view from the brakevan** - where we've been and where we're going.
- 9 **The Train to Oodna-woop-woop** On 16 November 1922, Chief Commissioner W A Webb arrived in Adelaide on the Melbourne Express. He was an American who had been engaged by the Barwell Government to overhaul a run-down South Australian Railways. He asked 'where is the end of the system?' 'Oodnadatta' was the reply. 'Well', said Webb, 'we leave on the next train to Oodnadatta'.
- 12 **A story of many Smiths** For more than half a century people have been fed a manufactured history about the origin of the name of *The Ghan*.
- 14 **A G (George) Williams** The Quorn engineman who was on duty on the night of 30 August 1923.
- 15 **Whither *The Ghan*?** The research and writing of this story has been conducted in the middle of a global pandemic.
- 18 **Finding Ernie Smith** The Afghans and their camels provided transport beyond the railways. But the Commonwealth Railways banned them from some trains. When a sleeping car was provided for the fortnightly Oodnadatta express in 1923 there was only one Afghan aboard. Ernie Smith was the Quorn engineman who quipped 'We'll have to call it the Afghan express'. This chapter examines the evidence and tells how Pam McAllister found the family of Ernie Smith.
- 31 **The railway gauge** The Oodnadatta line was extended to Alice Springs. To get there from Adelaide involved one break-of-gauge (at Terowie). In 1957 they added another break-of-gauge (Marree). There are six pages of selected newspaper items from 1845 to 1867 that shed light on how this gauge muddle in Australia came about.
- 45 **The Comical Railway** South Australia, in the 19th century, was deluded in thinking it had a birthright to the Northern Territory. It was also deluded in the belief that it could build and operate a railway from Adelaide to Port Darwin. It was a railway that should never have been attempted. It was a comedy of errors.
- 56 **The steam locomotive is a curious beast** Efficient operation of a steam locomotive calls for good coal and good water. The line to Oodnadatta/Alice Springs had neither.
- 61 **Bob (the railway dog)** Bob lived from about 1884 to 1895. He was a compulsive train traveller in SA, Vic and NSW. The railway to Hergott Springs (now Marree) was his favorite haunt. There have been other railway dogs in the world but Bob and his recorded adventures are without peer.
- 64 **1901 and all that** With Federation came the opportunity for South Australia to offload the Northern Territory (and the two lame-duck railways that were the failed attempt to build the Transcontinental railway). There is a year-by-year listing, from 1901 to 1939, of the negotiations and attempts to get that railway built.
- 72 **Puggaree Jack** The opening of the railway to Alice Springs. This railway was all about saving lives. But it was two weeks too late for Puggaree Jack.

- 74 **The Ghost Train** If the Darwin railway had been built in the age of steam it would have been a dismal failure. Coal and water would have to be carried great distances. It is postulated that a train from Port Augusta could probably get to Barrow Creek, where it would find neither coal nor water and could not return.
- 80 **Dining à la Ghan** The dining car was an essential part of *The Ghan*.
- 87 **Harold Clapp's 'Reso' Train** Victoria's Harold Clapp spearheaded Central Australia's tourism in July 1927.
- 93 **The direct railway to Port Augusta** The Commonwealth and the State of South Australia were at loggerheads for more than 20 years.
- 100 **The Maluka** The train that never was.
- 102 **Going Legless** Historically, the railways provided a social service but increasingly came under pressure to contain expenditure. There was an unwritten edict within Australian National that it did not see a future in carrying anything with legs – livestock, passengers and tables & chairs.
- 105 **Floods** The Finke and the Alberga caused the greatest havoc. The floods of 1967 and 1974 dictated that a new line be built to the west to avoid the worst of the floods.
- 108 **The changing face of The Ghan** Different carriages and locomotives showing *The Ghan* at different times of its evolution. The photo captions tell the story.
- 114 **Marree** The spiritual home of *The Ghan*. Half of the town's population at one stage was of Afghan descent. The town had an Afghan mosque and the adjacent quarter was called Ghan Town.

APPENDICES

- 120 **A Chronology** of major events.
- 129 **B Timetables** 18 pages that itemise the changes to the schedules and the reasons for those changes.
- 148 **C Place Names** and other locality information.
- 157 **D Linear map** Port Augusta to Oodnadatta.
- 158 **E The COVID (-19) diary.** On page 15, I outlined the damage done to interstate travel by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a weekly diary from 1 November that records the ups and downs of the pandemic and its effects on interstate travel.
- 164 **F A 1942 Journey** on *The Ghan* that arrived on time but two days late.
- 166 **G Water resources** on the Central Australia Railway.
- 167 **H George Williams statement.** Typed on the clunky old typewriter. George tells his version of the naming of *The Ghan*.
- 169 **I Ted Smith's 1954 article** in *The News* about the last steam hauled *Ghan*.
- 171 **J George Williams** Notes about narrow gauge steam.
- 172 **K Incidents and accidents**
- 173 **Bibliography**