



**A TANGIBLE CONNECTION TO THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILWAY.** At Quorn. The sign on the verandah is Est.1878. That was the year the Governor turned the first sod of the railway. JLW.

## CHAPTER 14

# THE CURSE OF THE NORTH - SOUTH TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILWAY PART 2.

In Chapter 6 we had seen that the transcontinental railway had come to a halt at Oodnadatta in 1891. Concurrent with building that line from Hergott Springs, South Australia had also built the railway from Palmerston (Port Darwin) to Pine Creek, which was opened in 1889. There was a gap of about 1100 miles between Oodnadatta and Pine Creek (1780 km).

Chapter 1 had introduced us to the conflict that had existed between the Deputy Engineer-in-Chief, Robert Patterson, and the Locomotive Superintendent, William Thow. This had been a long-standing feud that became public in 1883 when the Yankee engine hauling the Governor's special train at the opening of the railway to Aldgate, had failed near Blackwood, as a result of the melting of the firebars. There were accusations made regarding William Thow. There was a Royal Commission known as *The Thow Inquiry* which generated a report of 346 pages of Parliamentary Papers and closed with the comment:

The board acquit Mr Thow of untruthfulness and unfitness for public service, and do not consider that the rest of the charges have been proven. Had he been treated with more forbearance and suavity, there would have been much less of what was called 'friction' and the duties of the department might have gone on harmoniously.

The relevance of this to the topic of railway gauges is that governments move slowly, and whilst it was patently obvious that there needed to be a Railway Commissioner who had charge of the Railways Department, it took the Parliament another 5 years to achieve it. A Board of Railway Commissioners was appointed with Joseph Henry Smith as the Chairman. In his first annual report he drew attention to the urgent need to address the break-of-gauge problem. Nothing happened. The other major failing of the system was the poor financial position of the transcontinental railway.

Smith is also on record as saying that if there was going to be a fast express between Port Darwin and Adelaide, that the decision to build the line to the 3 ft 6 in gauge had been wrong. He was quite firm in his opinion that the 3 ft 6 in gauge would not support a fast express.

There is one other observation that deserves comment. It was a long journey from Adelaide to Port Darwin and back. In fact, Adelaide to Port Darwin by the sea route is the most distant of all the colonial capitals. It was a natural expectation that the Railway Commissioner would have visited every line and station on the system. Smith, in his 7 years in the role, did not get to Port Darwin. That is not intended as passing negative judgement on him, but it illustrates the absurdity of having a railway so far away.

We had previously encountered Frederick Holder when he was the proprietor and editor of the *Burra Record* in 1878, in Chapter 9, when he expressed his concern about the impending break-of-gauge.

He had entered Parliament in 1887. By 1901 he was South Australian Premier. He had been a delegate to the 1897 Federal Convention and had been highly regarded by Barton and Deakin. He rightly deserves to be remembered by history as one of the greats amongst the 'Fathers of Federation'. He nominated in the Federal election of March 1901 and was duly elected.



#### AT THE TOP END.

Our modern transcontinental railway is something to sing about. At Darwin.

#### AND AT THE BOTTOM OF THE NEXT PAGE .

Port Augusta was the southern extremity of the north-south transcontinental railway which was also something to sing about. These days the *Indian Pacific* and *The Ghan* no longer stop at Port Augusta. The only trains that now use the Port Augusta station are the heritage specials of the Pichi Richi Railway. This group had booked the entire steam train to Quorn.

He became the first Speaker of the House of Representatives. The first decade of the Commonwealth of Australia was not an easy one. It was a time of the ascendancy of the Labor movement. The old adversaries of the free traders and protectionists were still sorting out their differences. Western Australia was hankering for its railway and South Australia was having no joy with regards to the Northern Territory and its railway. There was the white Australia policy that was binding on all States. South Australia claimed that coloured labour was needed to develop the Northern Territory. Holder had been Speaker for 8 years, when on 9 May 1909, a most stormy debate raged, and continued for 14 hours. Sir Frederick Holder collapsed, insensible and died a few hours later.

But returning to 1901, Holder's success in the Federal election required him to vacate his role as Premier. One of his last official functions as Premier of South Australia had been to write to Prime Minister Edmund Barton with the offer of handing over to the Commonwealth, the Northern Territory and its railway. He was obviously fully familiar with the burden of grief that South Australia had endured to that time regarding the Northern Territory and probably had the insight to see that the way ahead would only bring more pain. Only six weeks before the birth of the new nation, the South Australian Parliament had been made aware of the situation.

#### **Chronicle (Adelaide) 17 November 1900.**

The finances of the Territory, as exhibited in the estimates for 1900-1 just passed by the House of Assembly, now claim attention. They involve a problem – a serious problem too; but Government and House alike appear to have made up their minds that it admits of no practicable solution at present. The one hope is that presently the Commonwealth will assume South Australia's responsibility by undertaking the administration of Alexandra Land, and that some fortunate development of the mining interest may make the task lighter for the Federation than it has been for the Province. There is no question that things financial are in an altogether unsatisfactory condition, if not actually going from bad to worse.... That debt is burdensome because most of the money borrowed was spent on a railway which is so far from being remunerative that it does not even pay working expenses. The

that it does not even pay working expenses. The fact that the Northern Territory finances have gone wrong is easily understood when it is realised that from the commencement the excess of working expenditure and interest on the Palmerston railway over revenue...the railway white elephant, which is eating money at the rate of £1000 a week, is the real trouble; and the financial problem lies quite beyond reach of solution by the customary economic expedients.

The incoming Premier of South Australia was John Jenkins, an American by birth. Once established in his new role, Jenkins wrote to Barton to confirm the offer. Both Holder and Jenkins had acted appropriately, but had ruffled the feathers of John Parsons who was a member of the South Australian Legislative Council. Parsons had been one of the movers behind the Land Grant Transcontinental Railway League. He was of the opinion that the Legislative Council should have been consulted. He was concerned that no time limit had been specified. The South Australian Parliament subsequently agreed that the railway should be commenced in a 'mutually agreed period'. There were two other prominent South Australians supporting Parsons and his League. Simpson Newland had been the member for Encounter Bay in the House of Assembly from 1881 to 1887. Vaiben Solomon had the dubious distinction of holding the office of Premier of South Australia for the shortest tenure – 8 days. This threesome all had some previous involvement with the Northern Territory. The concerns of John Parsons were addressed and it was agreed (by South Australia) that there would be 'a mutually agreed period' for commencement of the construction.

#### **Advertiser (Adelaide), 5 December 1901.**

Legislative Council. The vote was taken after three months' consideration on the motion of Mr Parsons respecting the transfer of the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth. It was agreed to by 13 votes to 9 in the following amended form that it is expedient that the Government should without delay communicate with the Imperial Government with a view to ascertaining whether they would approve of the transfer of the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth on the following conditions 1. That the liabilities

of the Northern Territory to South Australia be paid by the Commonwealth Government; 2. That the boundary of South Australia be extended northward to say the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel of latitude; 3. That the completion of the transcontinental railway from Oodnadatta to Pine Creek within a definite period to be mutually agreed upon the guarantee before any portion of the Northern Territory is transferred to the Commonwealth. This Council, however, regrets that Parliament was not consulted before negotiations were entered upon with the Federal Government.

We need to understand the reasons, at that time, for building this line. Or perhaps it had become a symbol of South Australia's struggle to free itself from domination by New South Wales and Victoria. Maybe it was the relationship with Queensland which had been a late starter and had usurped a large part of the Northern Territory. Queensland had ambition on the northern commerce with its efforts to divert the railway through its territory.

The colonists, both in South Australia, and in the eastern colonies were ever in pursuit of a faster journey for passengers and mails between the colony and 'home'. People talked about two possible routes. Via the Trans-Siberian railway and Port Arthur (Vladivostok) or via the Persian Gulf. It was claimed that by taking one of these overland routes and with fast steamers that connected with the express timetables, it would shorten the journey by a week. The railway would support a permanent presence in the north of the continent and keep the Union Jack flying.

But the greatest force driving this railway was the conviction that there was great mineral wealth yet to be discovered. There was a flaw in that logic, there being only one mineral that could pay its way to port over such a long distance - gold.

There had been a belief that there was potential for production of a great cornucopia of produce. There had been trials of rubber and sugar cane. But these enterprises needed labour and the white population did not fare well in the tropics.

There needed to be a good year-round supply of water for irrigation. King O'Malley was a member of Parliament for Encounter Bay who was subsequently elected to the first Federal Parliament. He was the moving force behind the establishment of the Commonwealth Bank. Regarding the Northern Territory he had a novel solution to irrigation in Central Australia – a pipeline under the sea from New Guinea.

But greed was a powerful motivating force and the merchants of Adelaide were buoyed by the prospects of their warehouses bursting with produce and sending forth mining and agricultural machinery.

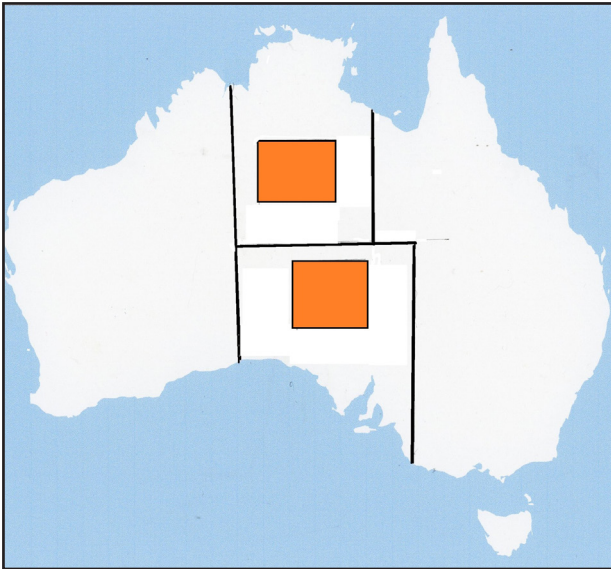
South Australia had elections in 1902 in which the transcontinental railway emerged as an issue that had generated considerable emotion. Parsons organised a public meeting that was so strong in its opposition to any abandonment of the railway that Jenkins agreed to meet a delegation. The outcome was that Jenkins agreed to support South Australia proceeding with the railway which would be financed, built and operated by an overseas syndicate in exchange for the large tract of land. The Act empowered the Commissioner of the South Australian Railways to call tenders with a closing date of 2 May 1904.

It was about this time that Barton wrote to Jenkins and enquired if Holder's offer of April 1901 was still open.

#### **Advertiser (Adelaide), 3 December 1902.**

The Land Grant Transcontinental Railway League at its meeting yesterday, accorded strong support to the reply of Mr Jenkins to the recent communication from the Federal Prime Minister respecting the Northern Territory. Sir Edmund Barton wanted to know, apropos of the Act for the construction of the transcontinental railway on the land-grant principle, whether the provisional offer to transfer the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth was still open, or whether it was invested with new conditions. The State Premier replied that the railway question is of too vital importance to this State to be committed to the decision of the Federal Parliament.





**THE LAND GRANT.** I have been unable to find any contemporaneous map that shows the extent of the land that was to be alienated. I have produced this map which gives an impression of 90 million acres divided into two parcels. However the land to be granted was oblong sections alternating on the two sides of the line.

*Continued from previous page.*

For this reason he asked Sir Edmund Barton to consider the negotiations for transfer suspended until the time allowed by the Act for receipt of tenders has expired. When Sir Frederick Holder offered the territory to the Federation in April, 1901, and for some time afterwards, the gift horse was scrutinised very narrowly in the mouth. The eastern states seem to have arrived slowly at a favourable judgement, but their newborn interest in our dependency being, at least so far as New South Wales is concerned, of a piratical character. South Australia has naturally taken alarm and is determined to protect her own interests.

Prime Minister, Edmund Barton was advised that any deal with the Commonwealth was off. It is recorded that he did not receive the news graciously.

The reasons for building a transcontinental north-south railway were changing but its advocates couldn't see that. Victoria R seemed to have been holding the Empire together. Two weeks into the new century and the new Commonwealth, she quietly slipped away to join her beloved Albert. It dampened the celebratory mood of the new Commonwealth. In rapid succession there came the Boxer Rebellion, the automobile and the Wright Brothers, and the Ocean-going ships boasted triple expansion engines resulting in a faster passage.

Refrigeration allowed the well-to-do to savour chilled vintage champagne as they dined at the Captain's table. Britannia no longer ruled the waves but had to share the honour with the United States. And Russia and Japan were new contenders for their claim on the oceans.

## It is time to stop and reflect.

Looking back at the Federation Convention of March/April 1897 in Adelaide, the delegates from Sydney and Melbourne were each fairly cohesive in striking for what was sought for each of those colonies. There was also some cohesion (collusion?) between New South Wales and Victoria. As an example, there was the near complete decision by the delegates from New South Wales to snub Broken Hill. Queensland wasn't there, Western Australia was a late starter and if Sir John Forrest hadn't been there, we wouldn't have known that there was a contingent from the west. The Tasmanians didn't present a strong voice. Now to South Australia. Kingston had organised the show and was President of the Convention. But there was no cohesion of the South Australian delegates. Josiah Symon and Richard Baker had been long-time adversaries of Kingston. Most of the other South Australians would have given Kingston a wide berth. For years afterwards, prominent South Australian political figures (like Playford) lamented that the larger states had dominated the process of Federation, leaving the smaller states at a disadvantage. We have seen in the case of the Overland Telegraph that South Australia had done it alone and had proven their mettle. They imagined that they could do it with the railway.

As this chapter unfolds, we will see the disintegration of the transcontinental dream railway. It became the embodiment of the perception that had persisted for a long time afterwards that there was inequity in the Federation.

This would become a malignant force driving South Australian politics in the 1920s and 1930s with the State Premier, Sir Henry Barwell, in office from 1920 to 1924, venting his wrath on the Commonwealth, manifesting it as an extreme paranoia directed at the 4 ft 8½ in gauge. The sad part was that the recipients of that wrath would be the people of South Australia, right up to the present.

Subsequent chapters will tell the story.

## THE TRAIN TO PINE CREEK c1910

From the author's collection.





**RUINS OF FETTLERS' COTTAGES.** They were provided about every 20 miles. These were north of Parachilna. It would have presented major social and logistic problems to have these dotted up the line all the way to Port Darwin. **JLW.**

**Leader (Orange) 7 January 1903.**

Few of the general public are fully aware of the situation in regard to the proposed transcontinental railway that the South Australian Government propose to have made from Spencer's Gulf (Adelaide) to Port Darwin (Palmerston) in the Northern Territory, a distance of some 2000 miles. It appears the terms of construction, as outlined by the Transcontinental Railway League of Adelaide (which, though an unofficial body, appears to have official backers) briefly are that a narrow gauge line be laid to Port Darwin and that a mixed train be run on it once a week, in return for which the State is to give the syndicate which undertakes the contract a 90-million acre grant of land made up of certain distance each side of the proposed line. The Jenkins ministry has passed a bill sanctioning the land grant to the enterprising capitalists... The Federal Government is objecting; but we fear in vain, as Premier Jenkins, for reasons best known to himself, is keen on getting the job through and in his latest communication to Mr Barton tells him plainly that his Government is going to do what is outlined in the Bill.

I was curious to know how this 90 million acre land grab would look on a map. I was unable to find a map where someone had drawn it.

No one stopped to consider the operational difficulties that would burden a transcontinental railway. Carting coal and water great distances, locomotive depots every 200 miles with their attendant labour force and the families that came with them. There would need to be maintenance of the track which would require settlements of track workers about every 20 miles. All for one mixed train a week. That one return train was not going to carry the requirement of sleepers to keep the track serviceable, nor would it be able to carry the coal that would be needed to get it back to Port Augusta. And there was the matter of water, not only for the engine but also for the trackworkers and their families. Come May 1904 and the tender box was opened. It was empty.

But there had been some serious interest by some investors who had exercised the nous to sit back and proceed at their own pace.

In March 1905 John Jenkins resigned to take up the position of Agent General for South Australia in London.

In 1905 we see the beginnings of the Butler dynasty in South Australia with the Hon. Richard Butler the first Liberal Premier. He lasted in that position for five months but remained a force within the South Australian Parliament until 1924. His son, Richard Layton Butler became Premier in 1927 and had two terms of office, but he too would be haunted by the ghost of the (north-south) transcontinental railway and the break-of-gauge. The Butler dynasty continues to represent South Australians. The Hon. Mark Butler, our present Federal Minister of Health is the great grandson of the first Butler and makes no apology for being on the other side of politics. With a bit of a laugh and a smile he tells us that the first Butler was known as "Tricky Dicky"

The first Butler does not seem to have involved himself in the transcontinental railway. His priority was getting railways built into his own electorate. The transcontinental railway issue seems to have gone quiet in 1905.

South Australia's new Premier in September 1905 was Tom Price. A Labor man.

In October 1904 Simpson Newland had rallied some local businessmen to the cause and called a meeting at which a Mr J T Moate was introduced as a representative of a London syndicate that had expressed an interest in the transcontinental railway. Mr Moate returned to England in 1905 but was back again in September 1906.

He brought with him £10,000 which was the required deposit to commence the tender process.

Meanwhile, Premier Price was quite open with the people of South Australia that he was personally not comfortable with the granting of a sizeable portion of South Australia. However, to his credit he was prepared to look at all options.

Price had three options. He could enter into a contract with Mr Moate and his syndicate. The second was to come to an arrangement with the Commonwealth. The third was for South Australia to proceed alone and build a few miles of railway each year, but to this was to be added the burden of increased taxes. Doing nothing was not an option. The people of South Australia were clamouring to have the railway completed, and at the same time the railway operation was continuing to consume money.

From October 1906 to March 1907 the Premier and Mr Moate engaged in an exchange of correspondence that leaves us feeling sorry for the Premier and dismayed by the tenacity of Mr Moate.

Mr Moate's opening salvo was to tackle the Premier for not promptly writing in response to the tender offer.

From the *Evening Journal*, 30 October 1906:

He has neglected the common courtesy of even replying to my letter of 9th inst containing a deposit receipt for £10,000 together with an offer to carry out a work of first magnitude respecting the welfare of every man, woman and child in South Australia.

The report in the *Evening Journal* continued:

Mr Price's reply was 'I must say Mr Moate got a fair one there, where he said I did not reply to his letter, I ought to have done so. It was my fault but in the hurly burly of politics I overlooked the courtesy of sending him a reply.'

The report then made reference to Simpson Newland, of whom the Premier said:

I do not wish to say anything about Mr Newland's letter. I have not a word to say about Mr Newland. I have every confidence in him and it is a good thing to have a man like him in any syndicate and men of his character ought to be very careful with whom they associate.

Mr Moate had made public comment regarding John Jenkins. The *Evening Journal*, November 1906, reported the Premier's response:

Considering the grave accusations that he has made against the honour and integrity of the Agent General...I have decided that I will absolutely decline to see Mr Moate in connection with the railway matter. This is absolutely necessary in justice to Mr Jenkins or any other gentleman who might be occupying a high and responsible position of Agent General for this State in London.

*Advertiser*, 26 February 1907.

The Premier was asked on Monday if he had anything further to say regarding Mr Moate's last letter to him.

'I cannot understand this man at all. He is really beyond my comprehension. On 23 January 1907, acting on my instructions, the Under Secretary sent him the following letter.

I am directed by the Premier to inform you, that after very careful consideration of all the terms of your tender on October 9, 1906, to construct the railway under The Transcontinental Railway Act 1902, the Government has decided not to accept it and returns herewith the deposit. I have also directed that the Government declines to have any further transactions with you in the matter.'

But Mr Moate was not going to take no for an answer and this is where the correspondence becomes interesting.



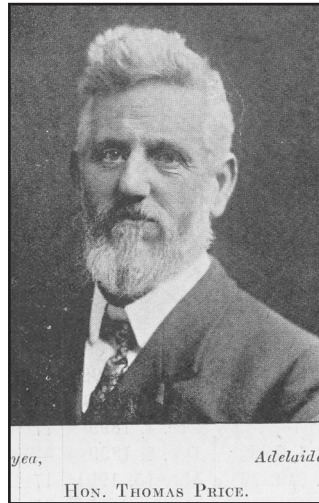
**A CATTLE TRAIN AT OODNADATTA.**

Of a particular note is the load of coal on the tender. If the north-south transcontinental railway had been built, the supply of coal and water would have been a major logistical problem

**STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.**

**B-47906**

From the *Cyclopedia of South Australia*. 1907.



**Advertiser, 8 March 1907:**

Negotiations between Mr J T Moate and the Premier of South Australia, dealing with the offer of a syndicate to construct a railway from Oodnadatta to Pine Creek, have plainly not been characterised by any display of friendly feeling on either side. Mr Moate's latest utterances might be accepted as an indication that he still has a few cards to bring in at the end of the game.

In that same edition was published correspondence that the paper advised had been over Mr Moate's signature. It was a letter of considerable length, included repetitions, and didn't make sense. What has been provided here is a greatly truncated version that leaves us in little doubt that Mr Moate was, at best, an eccentric but formidable negotiator, or at worst, suffering from a serious mental disorder.

Last week we were pained by the spectacle of the Prime Minister of our great self-governing State telegraphing Melbourne to ascertain the meaning of certain words and phrases in the Northern Territory - Commonwealth transfer agreement...I know that I am a great worry to him, but still I am willing to help him, but not to the extent of increasing his mental capacity, for the simple reason that I cannot... will Mr Price, if he can, say why he feels justified in refusing to have anything more to do with me.

The Premier is worried and therefore I do not attribute to him so shameful inaction as the wilful withholding of a portion of the correspondence .....I will be asking such a question undoubtedly (that) would be under any other circumstances, but I do expect him to immediately make amends by publishing it in full. If this is done, I venture to say that this question will no longer be begging for an answer, and the correct one too.

**RIGHT.** 'W' class locomotive on the Palmerston and Pine Creek railway (Northern Territory).

**FROM THE JLW COLLECTION.**



There may be some funny little things in our letters, and certainly there are some big inconsistencies, but he will have to face the music sooner or later. He has my gratuitous advice but it is just as well to do so at once. Will Mr. Price tell the public, if he can, why he feels justified in refusing to have anything further to do with me regarding the construction of the most important railway for the development and defence of the country...the public is entitled to know and I am. Mr. Price says that he will have nothing further to do with me in the matter. I say that he will and if he again says that he won't, I will take it to imply that he is very ignorant regarding the temperament of Australians. He may try to ride roughshod over some of us but not over me so long as the breath of an Australian remains in my body. No, the Premier is not done with me yet. And I am not done with him either. He must know and for once and for all that any shoo-fly-don't-bother-me wave of either his pen, tongue or hand will not in any sense suffice to annihilate the power and pertinacity.

It is hardly surprising that the Premier would see only one way forward and climbing aboard the Melbourne express and seeking a solution with Prime Minister Deakin.

Tom Price was suffering from silicosis from years of dust exposure in his occupation as a stone mason. His health was failing, and he would have been in no mood to enter into a bartering contest with one of the slickest silks in the country. On 13 February 1907, he reported that he had come to an amicable agreement with the Prime Minister.

It would be for the respective Parliaments of South Australia and the Commonwealth to frame legislation they would put in place for the transfer of the Northern Territory and its railways. But it seems that at a very early stage, the 'mutually agreed period' was dropped in favour of the work being done in a 'reasonable time'.

Jenkins had approached the Commonwealth as an adversary. Price's approach was reconciliatory, which was according to the nature of the man. Price's comments regarding the meeting with Deakin were published in the **Chronicle, 16 February 1907.**

I was...agreeably delighted with his actions to me and the personal interview was altogether different from the tone of the correspondence. I (was) remembering that the interests of South Australia must be maintained, so I went to Melbourne to see Mr Deakin. He met me in the discussion with reference to the Northern Territory, in a most liberal spirit, and there was not the semblance of anything approaching bartering. I approached the subject from a great Australian aspect and not from a little Australian point of view. In the interview with Mr Deakin, I found him to be in a most reasonable frame of mind.

Tom Price died in 1909. He had been South Australia's first Labor Premier. He had been a true man of the people, who is best remembered for giving Adelaide its electric trams. In those two years following the agreement with Deakin, Price would have had no cause to be at odds with the Commonwealth or Deakin.

The new Premier was Archibald Peake who was a Liberal, but needed to form a coalition with Labor to achieve Government.

There are three commentaries that have been written in the wake of that agreement that are relevant. Sir Josiah Symon was widely regarded as the best legal mind in South Australia at the time. He was a Senator and had been the Federal Attorney-General in Reid's Government.

**Critic (Adelaide), 20 March 1907** reported:

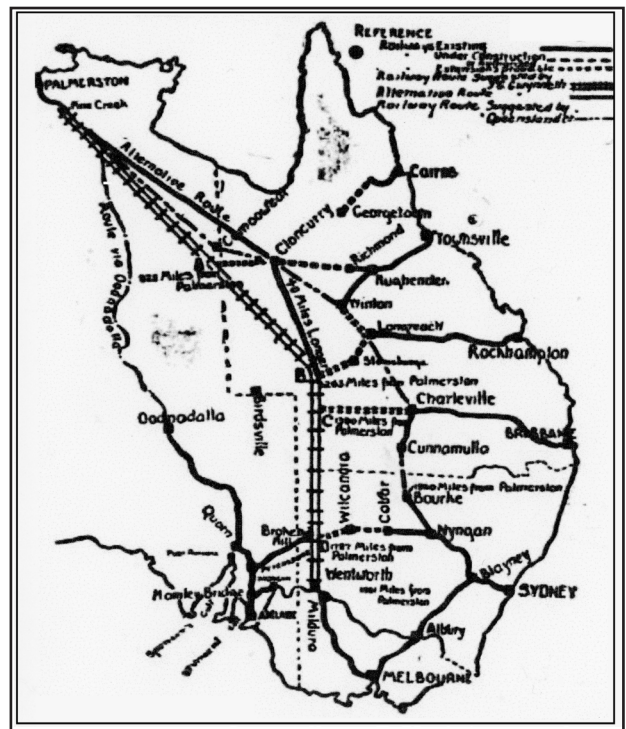
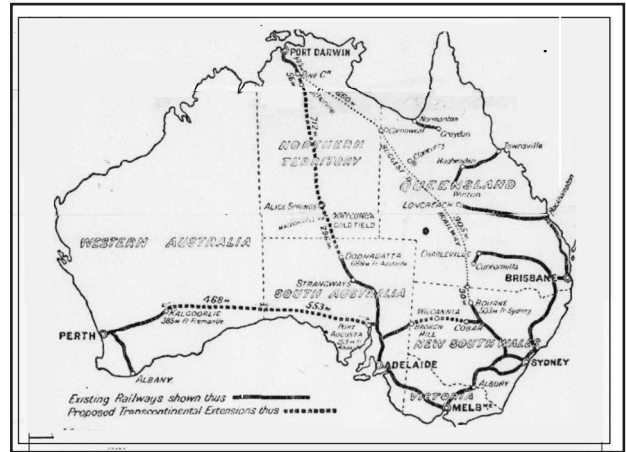
Regarding the transcontinental railway, people are gradually realising that this is a work of urgent importance and admits no further delay. They have also not failed to discover as a result of Sir Josiah Symon's piercing criticism, that the agreement which Premier Price arranged with Prime Minister Deakin is absolutely worthless - in fact would be very prejudicial to the best interests of SA. Sir Josiah proved conclusively that there is no provision in the agreement as to the date when the line from Oodnadatta to Pine Creek should be commenced, nor as to the route it should follow. He also pointed out that it was possible, under the Price agreement to build the line to Western Australia. If the Western Australian line is built then there will be no possibility of ever securing the other line. He showed clearly that this agreement was merely a clever dodge on the part of Sir John Forrest to push on with the Western Australian line which he has so much at heart. Sir Josiah Symon remarked the voice was the voice of Deakin but the words were those of Forrest. If Sir John Forrest was not present at the interview, he was probably not far off. The Price agreement is most probably the feeble attempt of an amateur diplomat to get the best of a shrewd statesman. Mr Price got the worst of the bargain.

Thomas Burgoyne had been the founder and editor of Port Augusta's newspaper and had represented that region in Parliament since 1884. He took a keen interest in matters in the north of the State. **Advertiser, 8 May 1907.**

The present Premier was fully justified in refusing to accept the tender although that refusal caused a good deal of excitement, and many hard words were said by people who imperfectly understood the position.

There are two matters that now warrant further mention. There had been an escalating movement from the eastern states to be connected to the transcontinental railway. They were all in it to have a slice of the yet to happen Northern Territory bonanza. Bourke, Broken Hill and even Mildura were touted as starting points. Queensland had just about every inland railway linking to the transcontinental railway.

The logic behind the Mildura plan was that the transcontinental railway north from there would be a continuation of the Victorian 5 ft 3 in gauge and thus avoid the break-of-gauge. It would allow faster speeds and the article from the **Mildura Cultivator, 10 June 1908**, quoted the significant delay at Terowie as an encumbrance. But what would happen when the broad gauge met the narrow at Pine Creek?



**NEW SOUTH WALES, VICTORIA AND QUEENSLAND** could see the potential for being connected to the transcontinental railway, but the concern for South Australia was that these routes could render the line south from Port Darwin a non event. The top map is from *The Daily Telegraph* 1902. The centre map is from the *Mildura Cultivator* in 1908 and the lower map is from the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 5 May 1908. The red line on the lower map represents the attempt by Queensland to have the line through their territory but still terminate in South Australia (at Hergott Springs).

## ALFRED DEAKIN

From *Quiz* 23 May 1901.



Worse still was a plan that had all lines leading to Queensland and no sign of a track south from Port Darwin. Queensland had investigated the option of a line that would start and finish in South Australia, but would go via Queensland.

The other matter that had been smouldering was the route by which the railway to Western Australia would take and the requirement for South Australia to grant permission for the Commonwealth to proceed. South Australia could have been hard-nosed in dealing with this and used it as a bargaining tool. But Tom Price, in his meeting with Deakin in February 1907, gladly gave his consent for this to happen.

South Australia proceeded with its Northern Territory Surrender Bill. It was for the Commonwealth to pass its Northern Territory Acceptance Bill.

There was a delay that was largely as a consequence of Queensland members of the Federal Government examining all possibilities for Queensland linking to the line. The following opinions are the third of those commentaries that need to be considered. They have been provided by the Mitchell KC, of Melbourne, following the passage of the Commonwealth's Northern Territory Acceptance Bill, as reported by the ***Advertiser*, 23 August 1910.**

Regarding the line going via Queensland:

I think that the line may be made in the Northern Territory with any reasonable deviation, which the Commonwealth Parliament may, at its discretion determine on...so long as it eventually reaches a point on the northern boundary of South Australia proper.

What would be a reasonable time in the case of the Federal Government would depend on so many considerations that are absent from an ordinary agreement between private persons, or even between public corporations, and questions of enforcing such an obligation legally, would present so many difficulties that I think practically that the matter could hardly be finally dealt with in a court of law.

Thus, at the end of the first decade of the new century, South Australians could wallow in the misery that they did not have a transcontinental railway and no prospect of it happening for a long time. It would sour their outlook regarding attempts at improving rail services in the State, particularly with regard to construction of new standard-gauge lines. It resulted in a state-owned railway system that was inefficient and uneconomical to the extent that it eventually disintegrated.

Here we must digress and delve into the history of the 4 ft 8½ in standard gauge and its progress toward being accepted as our national railway gauge. It has made progress but in the present state it is well short of being mandated. Australia has not established a statute that is comparable to what was mandated in England in 1846 and seems unlikely to do so.

The first serious talk about moving towards a uniform railway gauge for Australia was by Edward Eddy, Chief Commissioner of the New South Wales Government Railways. We had met him in Chapter 12. He had arrived in the colony in 1888, having been appointed to the position by Sir Henry Parkes.

In 1889 Eddy had recommended that the three colonies (NSW, SA and Victoria) confer on the matter of resolving the gauge problem. (Then as now, the Queensland narrow gauge network defied a fix. The general opinion is that the 3 ft 6 in gauge cannot be converted because of tight curves and restricted clearances). Eddy, like many others overseas, found it was cheaper and quicker to shift the rails closer than push them apart. He didn't go as far as to advocate the 4 ft 8½ as the preferred national gauge but it is hard to imagine that the 5 ft 3 in gauge would have come out of it as the first choice. Nothing happened.

We had seen in Chapter 12 that the Federal Convention had passed the problem of the railways over to the Railway Commissioners. The delegates to the Adelaide Convention were conscious of the need to act on the matter of a national gauge but there was not the support for federating the railways. The delegates had managed to appease their collective conscience by passing the baton to the Railway Commissioners to sort out.

The outcome of this was that the Commissioners of the railways convened in August 1897 and attempted to settle the question. It was a convention of the three colonies NSW, Vic and SA. They estimated that to convert the 4 ft 8½ in lines to achieve a national uniform gauge of 5 ft 3 in would cost £ 4,260,000 but to convert the broad-gauge lines of Victoria and New South Wales to the 4 ft 8½ in would be about half that amount. But nothing happened because no one knew where the money was going to come from.

In the following year NSW nominated the 4 ft 8½ in standard gauge but only for their own network. That was easy because they had no non-conforming track to convert.

In 1899 a conference of Railway Commissioners in Brisbane agreed that any new work should be done in such a way that it could be converted to 4 ft 8½ in. That conference of the Railway Commissioners was otherwise silent on the matter of gauges.

In 1901 the Commonwealth found itself discussing the possible east-west transcontinental railway. It was assumed that the new railway would be built as a standard-gauge line. There had been no route defined. 'Assumed' seems to have been the important word here.

The ***South Australian Register*, 28 January 1901**, published an interview with Sir John Forrest. He advocated the 4 ft 8½ in gauge for the railway to Western Australia.

That same year saw Victoria's Chief Commissioner, Mr Mathieson, add his name to the list of those calling for a national gauge. (Harding).

In 1903 a conference of railway engineers was convened for the purpose of determining the gauge of the railway to Western Australia. The engineers were unanimous in their recommendation of the 4 ft 8½ in to be the gauge of the east-west transcontinental line. This seems to have been the closest that Australia had come to mandating a national gauge.

In 1909 the surveys for the transcontinental railway were done and there was general agreement that the gauge would be 4 ft 8½ in, but South Australia had a change of mind, drawing attention to the fact that it would create a break-of-gauge at each end and called for the line to be built to the 3 ft 6 in gauge.

In 1911 the Railway War Council recommended the 4 ft 8½ in gauge to link all mainland capitals.

The history of the Trans-Australian Railway is long and complex. I have only been considering those matters that were relevant to the matter of gauges. We should remember that at this time there was no Commonwealth Railways. That entity did not come into being until 1917.

But the Commonwealth had become in 1911, more by circumstance than design, the owner and operator of a railway. The one from Palmerston to Pine Creek. Palmerston was very quickly renamed Darwin.

In Chapter 6 we had left the transcontinental railway where it came to a halt at Oodnadatta. We have now arrived at the second decade of the 1900s and it is still there. There is more to the story of the north-south transcontinental railway. That is for Chapter 18.

The next two pages are a chronology of the first two decades of the 20th century, looking at gauge-related issues but that is also entwined with the fate of the north-south transcontinental railway and the Trans-Australian Railway. The intention has been to have the text entries align with the date line which has required some abbreviations and condensation of the text, but still there are places where close alignment has not been possible.



**ABOVE.**

South Australian Railways Y class 100 was fitted with some signage appropriate to its role in 1912, at the turning of the first sod of the Trans-Australian Railway.

**From the Lionel Noble Collection.**

**BELOW.**

The transcontinental railway eventually made it to Darwin in 2004. It was possible because of heavy track built with continuously-welded rails and concrete sleepers that resulted in a low-maintenance railway. Central to its success has been the diesel-electric locomotives that can do Darwin and back without a hitch. **JLW.**

