



LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL.
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12.
PORT WAKEFIELD TO HOYLE'S PLAINS
TRAMWAY BILL.
 The Hon. C. H. BAGOT The House had determined to try the experiment. With respect to the Port Wakefield line, it could not be said that it was some day to be connected with the Victorian or any other lines, therefore there was no necessity for adopting the wide gauge.

Silly old goat, Captain Bagot!

CHAPTER 6

THE CURSE OF THE NORTH-SOUTH TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILWAY

PART ONE

The early development of the railway networks in the Australian colonies was largely haphazard. There emerged two patterns of development. In Victoria and New South Wales the railways became the 'roads that led to Rome'. That was a pattern of railways designed to channel all commerce towards the capitals. It persists to this day. Queensland and South Australia built railways to connect the country to the ports. Western Australia and Tasmania developed networks that had features of both patterns.

Back in England, by 1865, Sir Charles Fox, would have been sitting pretty. He could now go out and tell the world that Queensland had put his system in place. But the mood was dampened when his three double engines were declared failures. But then the impetus shifted to Captain Bagot. He was undeterred by the failure of the Queensland engines. South Australia would use horses to shift the farmers' crop to the sea.

By 1860 South Australia had two distinct government rail systems.

From Adelaide there had been a broad-gauge line to Port Adelaide that was opened in 1856. That had been rapidly followed by a broad-gauge railway north to Gawler, and then extended to the copper mining centre of Kapunda. This broad-gauge system used steam locomotives.

To the south of Adelaide was the horse tramway from Goolwa to Victor Harbor.

There was a third. The private railway connecting the copper mines at Moonta and Wallaroo to the smelters at Wallaroo Bay. Again, it was operated by horses.

South Australia had been blessed by providence with good agricultural country that was penetrated by two gulfs, thus allowing the development of small ports dotted along the coast. The South Australian economy was based on wheat farming and copper mining. A strong secondary industry developed for manufacture of agricultural and mining equipment.

There was a clamour by farmers and would-be farmers for more land and the Government was eager to meet this demand and keep its coffers well stocked.

Thus, the march of agriculture to the Strathalbyn region and the mid north, around Clare. But this country would only be attractive to the farmers if suitable transport was available.

There were three railway schemes that emerged in the mid-1860s.

1. An extension of the northern line to Burra. The Burra copper mine, once touted as the richest mine in the world, was not a direct factor in this railway scheme. By 1866 the mine was near exhausted but it had, in better times, attracted agricultural development and it was this produce that needed the transport.
2. A line towards Leasingham and Clare.
3. A line connecting the Goolwa tramway to Strathalbyn. The junction was to be made at Middleton.

All three were hatched as being horse operated.

THE CARTOON above is by Greg Judd.

BELOW. Captain Charles Harvey Bagot, who gave South Australia the 3 ft 6 in narrow gauge.

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Captain Bagot had rallied support. He would use one of these new railways to show South Australia the 3 ft 6 in gauge was the way of the future.

Richard Hanson was the manager of railways and behind the times. He could not see past horse tramways. Enter Henry Coathupe Mais, who arrived in the colony in 1867 to take up the position of Engineer-in-Chief. He had previously worked in Victoria and had some prior, but brief, employment with the Sydney Railway Company after the departure of Francis Sheilds in 1851.

It is time to digress for a while. We must turn our attention to another matter that was weighing heavily on the South Australian Government about this time. The Northern Territory. Officially, it was known as Alexandra Land.

The Colonial Office in London had carved the Australian continent in two, by defining the eastern section as New South Wales being that part east of the 135th meridian. (That is a line very close to the present South Australian towns of Elliston and Coober Pedy). In 1824 they shifted that boundary west to the 129th (the present border between South Australia and Western Australia). Then in 1851 they defined the boundaries of South Australia, then Victoria, and in 1859, the boundaries of the youngest of the Australian colonies, Queensland. The part that remained was known as the Northern Territory. New South Wales showed no interest in this corner of their colony.

Great Britain had made three attempts at establishing settlements on the northern shores of the continent, but one after another, they failed. There was a belief that if the north of Australia could not be provisioned from the sea, it should be settled from the south.

Of all the colonies of Australia, it seems that South Australia was the one that most revered England as 'home' and was fired with the desire to keep the Union Jack flying in the north of Australia.

And in 1858 there was talk of a railway joining the north and south of the continent. There was a belief in South Australia that the north of the continent was awaiting development of a cornucopia of produce and was rich in minerals for the taking. But there was not one white inhabitant living in the Northern Territory nor had there been an overland route blazed.

In 1859 Caroline Carleton wrote the words to the 'Song of Australia'. The third verse is no longer relevant to our times but gives a glimpse of the ambitions of the colony at that time:

*There is a land where treasures shine
Deep in the dark unfathomed mine
For worshippers at Mammon's shrine
Where gold lies hid and rubies gleam
And fabled wealth no more doth seem
The idle fancy of a dream –
Australia, Australia, Australia*

In 1859 South Australia found itself facing a greater foe. Queensland. It was a new colony that year, having been carved off New South Wales. The original western boundary of Queensland was the 141st meridian, which was a line contiguous with the South Australian eastern border.

South Australia spied an opportunity in the Northern Territory. Victoria too, saw opportunity in the Northern Territory and was planning an expedition.

In South Australia the quest for the north had become stalled when the early explorers found, what they believed was a great horseshoe-shaped salt lake, blocking their way. In 1844 Charles Sturt had tried to find a way by going east, but instead found only the stony desert that now bears his name.

The explorer, John McDouall Stuart, had been sponsored by the Chambers brothers, John and James, who had amassed large pastoral holdings in South Australia. If Stuart found good pastoral country in the Northern Territory they would be well placed to have first pick. In 1860, Stuart found that the great horseshoe lake was a series of lakes and there were places where a route was possible. And the country was blessed with a chain of artesian springs that extended almost to the Northern Territory border.

It took Stuart three attempts to cross the continent and return to Adelaide. The various members of the Chambers family would have been well pleased to find their names dotted across the map. While this was happening, Victoria had dispatched its own expedition with much ado and flag waving. Within a few days of each other, through the South Australian railhead of Kapunda, there would be recorded the end of the two expeditions, completing the respective expeditions by rail.

From the ***South Australian Register***, 13 December 1862:

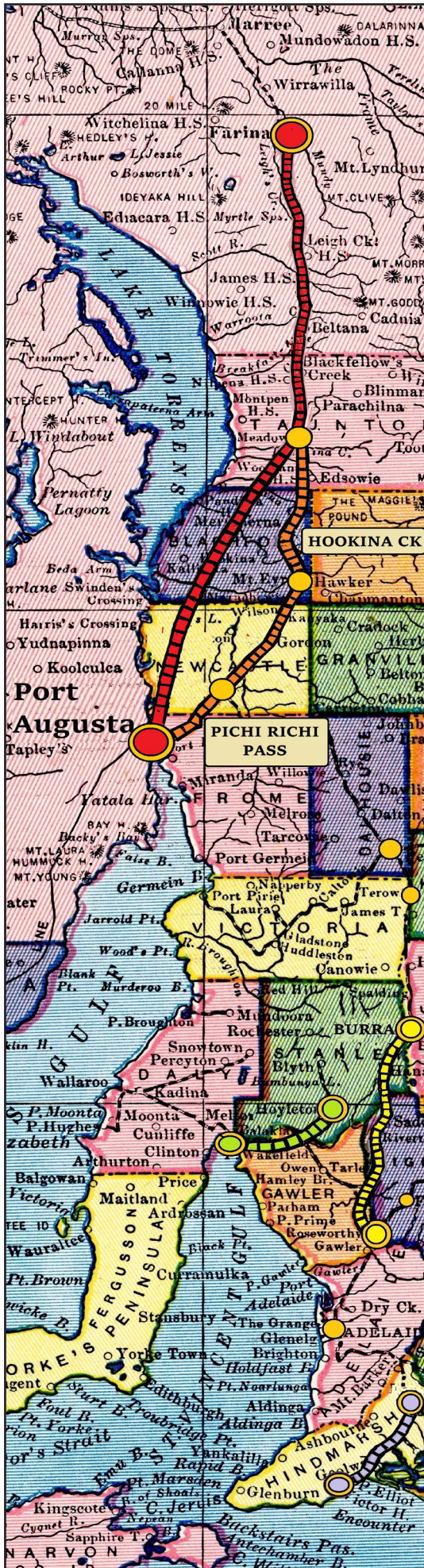
From our own correspondent. Gawler. December 11.

His Worship, the Mayor of Gawler, anxious for the feeling of sympathy in the fate of the two gallant explorers, Burke and Wills, felt by the people of Gawler should find due expression, telegraphed yesterday to Kapunda, for information as to the arrival of the remains at Gawler, and received intelligence that they would reach Gawler Station, from Kapunda, by the first train today.

From the ***South Australian Register***, 18 December 1862:

I, John McDouall Stuart, commander of the South Australian Great Northern Expedition, to the Commissioner of Crown Lands, Kooronga, December 16, 1862. Through you I beg to inform His Excellency the Governor in Chief and the Government that I have accomplished the object of the expedition. Party behind all well. I will be in town by the evening train tomorrow.

Queensland dispatched an expedition that had been sent in search of Bourke and Wills. It had discovered good country and promptly submitted a bid. In April 1862 they were rewarded with a generous slice of territory with the shifting of the western border of that colony from the 141 Meridian to the 138 Meridian. That tract of good country was named the Barkly Tableland, honouring Queensland's first Governor. On 6 July 1863 the remainder of the Northern Territory passed to South Australia.



South Australia had visions of establishing a city on the north coast, and in 1864, dispatched a party to establish a settlement. The site was Escape Cliffs. This was led by Boyle T Finniss who had been South Australia's first Premier in 1857. The settlement was abandoned within a year.

The Australian colonies at this time enjoyed a degree of peace-of-mind that the Royal Navy had control of the seas. And it was there to protect Her Majesty's loyal subjects in the colonies. But there was an element of uneasiness in the colonies that they were separated from home by about 6 weeks, being the time it took for the mail to cross the seas.

The colonists became very anxious if the mail was overdue. There were some events that heightened that sense of isolation. The Crimean war of 1854 was well underway before the colonies knew. And there was the additional anxiety that the Russians were assembling a Pacific Fleet. In 1861 the colonists partook of their Christmas dinner with good cheer, oblivious to the fact that their kinfolk back at home were mourning Prince Albert who had died on 14 December. The colonists yearned for a telegraph.

The technology of the electric telegraph dates from 1844 when Samuel Morse developed his code based on dots and dashes, and established telegraph communication between Washington and Baltimore. The first telegraph in Australia was between Melbourne and Williamstown in 1854. South Australia was quick to embrace the new technology. The first telegraph in South Australia was in February 1856, between Adelaide and Port Adelaide. In 1857, a start was made on the telegraph between Adelaide and Melbourne. They were the first colonial capitals to be connected telegraphically. All of the Australian mainland eastern capitals were connected by 1861. There were no particular technological or logistic problems in establishing those intercolonial links. Building telegraph lines overland involved no major technological challenge.

The challenge was undersea cables. Whereas overland telegraphy was good for about 100 miles between repeater stations, the undersea cables would need to go 1,000 miles or more. That required a thick copper wire that would preserve the voltage over the distance. Next there was the problem of insulating the cable. This was done with a rubber compound, gutta-percha. It was a new technology. One tiny defect in the insulation would cause the failure of the whole cable. These cables were very expensive to produce and they were heavy. There was no means of joining cables that would be placed on the ocean floor. They had to be manufactured to the total distance of the cable and rolled directly into the hold of the ship that would be laying the cable. The requirement of the ship to do the cable-laying was that it would need to carry as much ballast as cable. As the cable was discharged into the sea, the ship would rise in the water.

At the beginning of chapter 4 is a Greg Judd cartoon. It depicts the engineer, Brunel, in front of one of his broad-gauge engines, and behind it, the *Great Eastern*, the largest steamship at the time. It was a remarkable feat of engineering, but it was a marketing and financial failure.

THE ORIGINAL IS FROM THE PICTURESQUE ATLAS OF AUSTRALASIA 1888. The three railways considered in the late 1860s were Strathalbyn (lilac), Port Wakefield (lime green) and Burra (yellow). The red line is the original plan for the line north from Port Augusta. The orange is the amended route across the Willochra Plain.

It didn't do much trans-Atlantic passenger business, but the great ship found favour with the cable companies. The cables were about 2 inches in diameter and weighed four tons per mile.

Many of the cables failed and investors lost money. There was generally no means of raising a failed cable to determine the cause, so it was a hit and miss as cable manufacturers tried to improve the technology. It was not until 1866 that successful trans-Atlantic telegraphic communication was established.

On 29 April 1870, South Australia entered into an agreement with the British Australia Telegraph Company. That company would lay the undersea cable from Java and South Australia would build the Overland Telegraph to Port Darwin.

It was a massive undertaking for the State with a population of less than 200,000, and when compared to the economies of New South Wales and Victoria which both had population and gold.

At 3.00 pm on 22 August 1872, the wires of the north and south sections were joined. North and south of the colony were joined but there had been a problem with the cable from Java that would not be restored until 21 October. One of the first telegraphic messages to be transmitted from London was from Queen Victoria conferring the honour of CMG on the South Australian Superintendent of Telegraphs, now Sir Charles Todd.

Todd had masterminded the Overland Telegraph and seen its construction through to the end. He had arrived in the colony in 1855. He was, about that time, described as "bespectacled, of slight build and being as dynamic as a Galvanic battery."

There were many heroes who did their part to bring Todd's vision to reality. The nature of the country was unforgiving and there were deaths. On a happier note there was the discovery, by one of Todd's survey teams, of a water source that they named after Todd's wife, Alice.

Credit is also due to George Goyder, the Surveyor General, who had mapped the line of rainfall in 1865. In 1869 that contribution was yet to be acknowledged. He had been sent north to select a site for the northern city, and to proceed to its survey. Port Darwin.

Returning now to Captain Bagot in 1866.

The Strathalbyn line was the first of those three schemes to come before the Parliament. Bagot seemed to have rallied enough support to have the numbers to amend the Bill to change gauge from the 5 ft 3 in gauge to the 3 ft 6 in gauge. It would involve converting the existing broad-gauge tramway to narrow gauge. The Commissioner of Public Works spoke against the amendment, claiming that the storms blowing in from the Southern Ocean would topple the narrow-gauge trucks.

The next Bill to come before Parliament was the line to Burra. The Bill was presented to Parliament almost concurrent with the arrival of Henry Mais, the new Engineer-in-Chief. Captain Bagot claimed that with the savings that would be forthcoming from the narrow-gauge line, a third rail could be laid into Adelaide, thus overcoming the problem of transshipment of goods from one gauge to another. Henry Mais considered that the line was best worked by small engines. This was about the time of the Queensland experience with the 'Fairlie' double engines. The idea of building the Burra line to the narrow gauge seems to have faded away.

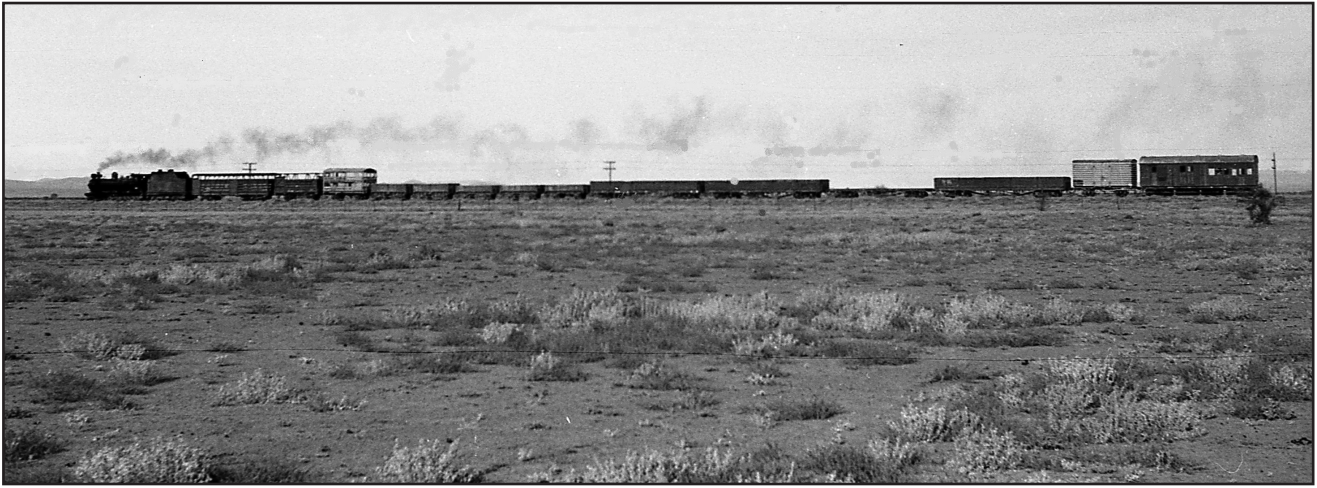
That left the line to Leasingham and Clare. It would be crossing the plains from Port Wakefield and would require very little engineering between the Port and Hoyle's Plains. But it would require some costly works once into the hilly country to Leasingham and Clare. So, it became a line from Port Wakefield to Hoyle's Plains (later Hoyleton). It was a route that slowly ascended on a very gentle gradient from Port Wakefield to the terminus. The only engineering of note was a bridge over the River Wakefield.

Captain Bagot's pitch to the Parliament was that this line would not be connected to any other line in the colony and therefore presented a unique opportunity to experiment with the new gauge without the burden of the break-of-gauge. There was only one curve.

Now, remembering that Fitzgibbon in Queensland had justified his choice of the narrow gauge because of the many five-chain curves. This curve between Hoyle's Plains and the River Wakefield (Balaklava) had a radius of about five miles. Henry Mais was not impressed and calculated that the only saving on the construction cost would be the smaller sleepers. But Captain Bagot was quick to convince the Parliament that he was wiser than their new Engineer-in-Chief.



THE GOODS SHED AT HOYLETON. At the time this was built it was the only building of any substance at Hoyleton. The Wesleyans used it for their church services. It still stands but despite being heritage listed and the recipient of some restoration funding in 1988 it is still showing neglect. JLW.



ON THE WILLOCHRA PLAIN BETWEEN QUORN AND HAWKER. The train was the weekly goods to Hawker where there was regular loading of barytes for the processing plant at Quorn. But it is the vegetation that requires comment. This was the Willochra Plain that became the undoing of many farmers. JLW.

The passage of this Bill through the South Australian Parliament was a farce. The House of Assembly had introduced the Bill as having a gauge of 5 ft 3 in. It had then gone to the Legislative Council where Captain Bagot had rallied the numbers in support of the narrow gauge.

The Bill had been sent back to the Lower House, where it was believed there were the numbers and it was expected that the gauge would revert to the original 5 ft 3 in. But it was near the end of the parliamentary session, and they were running out of time in the House of Assembly.

Captain Bagot was then 78 but would live long enough see the outcome. In 1880 the first break-of-gauge on the Australian mainland was at Hamley Bridge.

The Port Wakefield Tramway was opened on 1 January 1870. There were two interesting aspects to its operation. The rakes of empty trucks were hauled up the gentle grade to Hoyleton where they were loaded with the bagged wheat. They would then gravitate back towards the port under the control of a brakeman and usually would need the horses again for the last few miles into Port Wakefield. It was claimed that with a tail wind they could make it all the way to the port. The return of the loaded trucks to the port was a fairly quiet operation and there were apparently some near misses. Others who have written about Port Wakefield Tramway in recent times have claimed that the horses rode in trucks back to the port. The available evidence is that this was not a routine part of the operation.

In many respects the Port Wakefield project was ill-conceived. Port Wakefield is a shallow inlet near the top of Gulf St Vincent. Ocean going vessels would have to anchor some miles off the port, and bagged wheat was put into lighters at the port and taken out to the ships. The Government then embarked on another experiment. They leased the line to a contractor but within a few months he had abandoned the line. The farmers around Leasingham and Clare were not happy. They had to cart their wheat some distance to Hoyleton. The solution was to extend the line northwards to Blyth's Plains which would shorten the road haul for the Clare farmers.

There were some in the Parliament who could see what was about to unfold. They were a vocal minority. One of them was Sir Thomas Elder, founder of the prominent stock firm. In 1872, when there was talk of this extension, there was a move to build the extension as a broad-gauge line and convert the existing tramway. It was one last opportunity but Parliament would not be swayed.

Returning now to the transcontinental railway and the Northern Territory.

The 1870s was a decade of mixed fortunes for the Northern Territory and the prospects for the trans-continental railway.

There was the discovery of alluvial gold at Pine Creek in 1870 but it was soon worked out. Soon people started talking about a transcontinental railway that would closely follow the telegraph line.

The Border Watch, Mount Gambier, 20 May 1871:

An enthusiast by name R Manual of Collins Street, Melbourne, has been recalling the recollection of the South Australian public that thirteen years ago he predicted the carrying out of an overland telegraph and a transcontinental railway and now his prophetic soul leaps for joy at the assurance of the accomplishment of his scheme.

Even before the wires were joined the South Australian Parliament was quickly off the mark, and had drafted a Port Augusta and Port Darwin Railway Bill. There had been previous Bills that had tried to attract English capitalists. This was not the first time that South Australia had tried to trade a substantial acreage of its interior for a transcontinental railway. It had been tried in 1862, and again, with the area doubled, in 1864.

Advertiser, 18 June 1872:

The construction of the telegraph line had disclosed what had only been partly known before - that the interior is admirably adapted for pastoral occupation (Mr Tassie, Mayor of Port Augusta).

South Australia was not wealthy enough to grasp this great undertaking. (Mr Mildred).



THE TRANSCONTINENTAL HOTEL AT FARINA. There are no longer any permanent inhabitants of the town but it has attracted volunteers from a wider region whose efforts have been to stabilise the remains. **JLW.**

The item below puts it another way. It was published by the ***South Australian Register*, 11 June 1875, having copied it from the *Sydney Morning Herald*.**

For a small community the South Australians are far from wanting in power to attract attention. On the contrary, they may be said to possess a redundancy for it. In one direction or another they are always doing, or attempting to do, something remarkable...The acquisition of the Northern Territory brought in its train the hasty, and under the circumstances, improvident enterprise of constructing single handed a telegraph line from the southern to the northern coast. And the achievement of that object has set the people first dreaming about, and then planning the formation of a transcontinental railway, when the colony is apparently overtaken by the work of connecting itself by rail with its neighbours in NSW and Victoria...The acquisition of the Northern Territory with the temptations, the troubles, the blunders and the burdens it has involved, has been productive of a pecuniary loss and political discredit, and, for the present at least, has impeded the real progress of the colony instead of promoting it.

Then, in rapid succession, there were two major setbacks.

On 22 February 1874, natives attacked the telegraph station at Barrow Creek and killed a telegraph operator and a linesman.

Communication with the northern outpost required travel by sea halfway around the continent. In fact, of all the Australian colonies, South Australia was the most distant when considering access by the sea route.

The Government had chartered a vessel, the *Gothenburg*, for three years to provide regular voyages between Adelaide and Port Darwin. On 22 February 1875, the *Gothenburg* was returning to Port Adelaide when it ran in to a tropical cyclone off the Queensland coast with the loss of approximately 100 lives. There were many Government officials and their families aboard. It was estimated that the loss of lives was equal to about one seventh of the white population of the Northern Territory.

We now return to railway matters in South Australia.

Railway development in South Australia had been a haphazard process when, in 1874, Premier James Penn Boucaut established a Railway Commission to examine the future direction of railway extension in the colony. The membership of this Commission included Surveyor General, George Goyder and Engineer-in-Chief Henry C Mais. The report was finished the following year and recommended 31 new railway lines for which Boucaut planned to finance with a loan of £3 million.

However, there had been a change of government and approval was not forthcoming by the Parliament. The report still remained a valuable guide and many of the lines eventually went ahead. Chapter 10 describes the recommendations of the report.

From 1873 to 1875 we find the Adelaide newspapers, bubbling over with reports of deputations, occasional statements by members of Parliament, and meetings in city and country, all eager to make a start on the great transcontinental railway. A meeting in the Adelaide Town Hall had evidently been a spirited event.

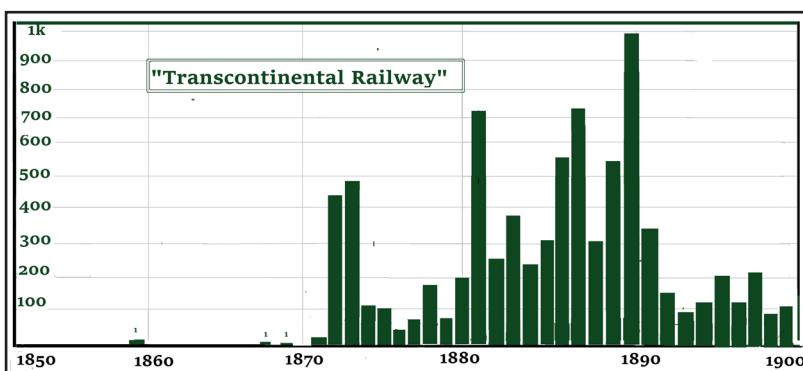
***South Australian Register*, 18 June 1872:**

...said he was present at the meeting at the Town Hall, Adelaide, and was quite ashamed of the so-called legislators, who instead of endeavouring to ascertain the opinions of the people on the subject of the railway (to Port Darwin), in order to guide them in dealing with the question tried all they could to prevent calm discussion, and then broke up the meeting.

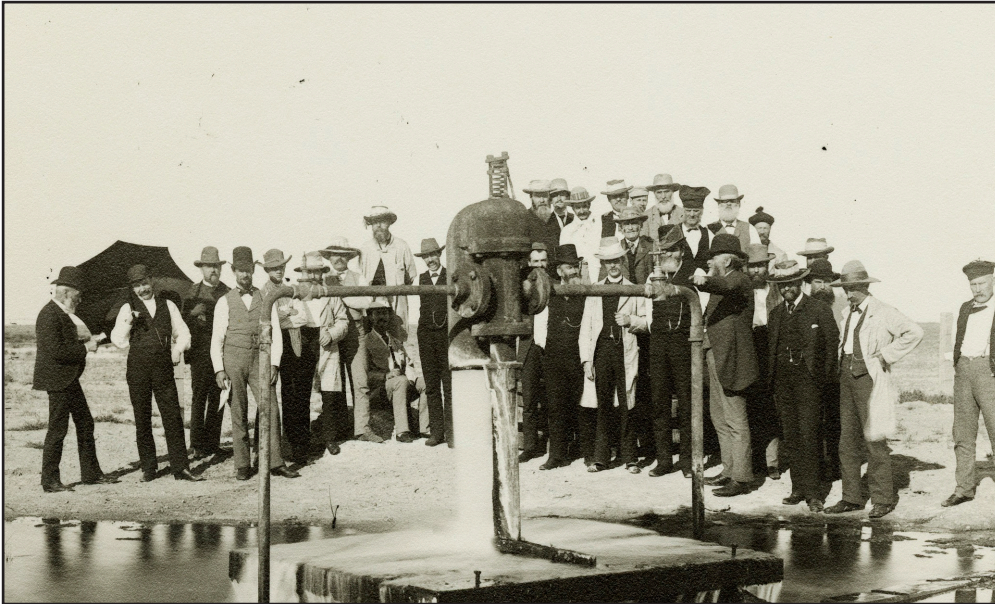
A meeting at the Northern Hotel at Port Augusta was convened for the purpose of a railway running north from that point for a distance of about 200 miles.

***Adelaide Observer*, 27 June 1874:**

Moved - "That this railway, if constructed, may form the basis of the Transcontinental railway by its extension from time to time, as required by the settlement of the country northward."



RIGHT. The number of references to reports in South Australian newspapers when conducting a search on the Trove facility for "transcontinental railway". It is admitted that such research is an 'imprecise science' but it does illustrate well that press activity was concurrent with the success of the Overland Telegraph - 1870 - 1872. The chart has not been continued beyond 1899 as there was the confounding effect of the other transcontinental railway.



IN 1889 a party of 31 members of the South Australian Parliament undertook an excursion to Angle Pole (near Oodnadatta) which was the extent of the Great Northern Railway, as had been legislated to that time. One of their number was Freidrich Krichauff, who was an accomplished photographer and has left us with a collection of quaiity images.

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There was nothing in Boucaut's 1875 plan about a transcontinental railway. It seems that the South Australians could not contain themselves, wallowing in their new-found importance of the success of the Overland Telegraph. The idea of building a railway next to the telegraph seems to have come from nowhere but no-one knows where, when or how. It seems to have been plucked out of thin air. Politicians and newspsper editors talked this up.

The 1875 plan did provide for a narrow-gauge railway from Port Augusta, north 245 miles to Yudnamuntana, on the eastern part of the Range, which at the time offered some promise of mineral traffic. That route was over some of the higher parts of the Flinders Ranges and would have required heavy engineering.

Another observation was that this line was veering east toward the Cooper Creek, thus raising the question of whether the original intention was for any extension to be in the direction of the Queensland border. It would have made sense because there were ultimately more cattle that came down that route than by the track that was west of Lake Eyre. But when the Bill was introduced it was, for a distance of 200 miles and to the west of the Range and terminating at Government Gums.

The Willochra Plain seemed to offer good farming country but it would only be viable for the farmers if they had the means to send their bountiful harvest to Port Augusta. The Parliament was promptly forthcoming with a solution. They shifted the railway to go through Pichi Richi Pass and smack through the centre of the Willochra Plain, then down the other side of the plain to descend by a route following the Hookina Creek. The Government could now survey the land and sell it to the farmers.

But while the Parliament could shift railways it couldn't make it rain.

Twice in this chapter there has been mention of George Goyder, first in the selection and survey at Port Darwin, and now as a member of Boucaut's Commission on railways.

There is more on Goyder in Chapter 9. George Goyder's enduring contribution to South Austalia was his survey of lands and vegetation in 1865 that delineated the part of the colony suitable for reliable agriculture. It is known as 'Goyder's Line of Rainfall'.

The Willochra Plain was on the wrong side of Goyder's Line but the seasons through the 1870s had been good and there was a growing tide of opinion that Goyder had been wrong. There was also a growing belief that by some science, yet unknown, the rain followed the plough. So the Willochra Plain was subdivided into small farm lots and then the farmers moved in.

On 18 January 1878, the South Australian Governor, Sir William Jervios, was at Port Augusta for the ceremonial turning of the first sod of the Port Augusta to Government Gums Railway. He announced that this railway would eventually extend to Port Darwin. The unknown in all of this is whether His Excellency himself, had been caught up in the fervor of the transcontinental railway, or whether he had been briefed on the matter. And so for the Parliament and the people of South Australia it was official. But they had no idea how it would get there.

Two weeks after the official turning of that first sod, the following encouragement was provided by Port Augusta's editor with a degree of fanatical zeal:

Port Augusta Dispatch, 2 February 1878:

Our pioneers, the squatters, who have prepared the land for the plough and made South Australia the granary of the south should have every encouragement to push out into the interior where they will turn the present desert country into a fruitful field while the farmers who follow in their wake should have, in common with them every facility for filling the land with a teeming population and also the means of speedy communication with the markets of the world. If we intend to become a prosperous country and eventually take our place among the nations of the earth on equal terms, we must keep these means of progress in advance of our actual requirements, and not, as has been the case with the northern railway... allow progress to pass by with the country unimproved and undeveloped for want of the means to communication between the seaboard and the interior.

His Excellency was back in 1882 for the opening of the railway. By this time there had been a change of outlook and a reluctant acceptance that George Goyder had not been wrong. The decade of the 1880s started with drought. Whether it was wishful thinking or plain denial of the situation, His Excellency made known that the terminus would be renamed Farina. They were not quite ready to let go of the vision that this would be the granary of the south.

The Government then proceeded to advance the railhead to Hergott Springs. That was at the confluence of the two stock routes and was also another 32 miles in the direction of Port Darwin. The railway to Hergott Springs was opened in 1884. From Hergott Springs the railhead was advanced following the route of the Overland Telegraph.

Many farmers had fared poorly as a result of the drought years and there were appeals to the Government to provide work for these unfortunates. Prior to this time all railway construction in South Australia had been undertaken by contractors and it is true that many of these contractors made some very generous profits. But they were also efficient at what they did.

A railway construction branch was established to build the line north from Hergott Springs, as much with the purpose of providing employment as getting the railway to Port Darwin. It has been stated that at any one time there were about 600 men working on the railway beyond Hergott Springs. It was a project that was cursed by many fatalities. There were some who fell off travelling trucks, and to quote the newspapers of the time, 'were cut to pieces'. Others perished from heat and dehydration.

PUTTAPA GAP

On the Great Northern Railway. This was the deepest cutting on the line.

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It was on this railway, in April 1886, that South Australia recorded its worst railway disaster, to that time, when measured by the number of deaths from the one accident. A work train had been returning to Hergott Springs, with about thirty navvies in the trucks. The engine was pushing the trucks from behind. The trucks had run into a mob of cattle and derailed on an embankment. Five navvies were killed. (This disaster was eclipsed in 1928 when six workers were killed in a tunnel collapse near Belair).

In 1888 Joseph Henry Smith was the newly-appointed Chairman of the Commissioners of the South Australian Railways. He was an expert who had previously been with the Great Western Railway in England. In his first annual report he drew attention to two issues that needed to be addressed by South Australia. The first was the problem of multiple gauges. The other was the poor financial performance of the Great Northern Railway.

In 1889 a group of parliamentarians travelled to the railhead and, for the first time, came face to face with the miserable country of which they had spoken of so enthusiastically in the Parliament. The pastoralists had been the intended source of revenue that was going to have the transcontinental railway pay its way during the construction years ahead. The parliamentarians were faced with the reality that the pastoralists were not sending their cattle by rail because there were no cattle to send.

The railway to Oodnadatta was opened on 7 January 1891. The 1890s brought drought, depression and the collapse of some banks. The dream railway had come to a halt at Oodnadatta, and would stay there for another 40 years.

But the dreamers were not to be silenced. Were they dreamers or maybe misguided? They were not going to let go of this dream. We will pick up the saga of the transcontinental railway again in Chapter 14. In the meantime this dream would become deeply embedded in the collective psyche of South Australia.

