

## NEWSLETTER

### Mr Todd's Marvel



**MILESTONES IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

**1872**

**THE OVERLAND TELEGRAPH LINE**

On August 22nd, 1872, near Central Mount Stuart, Charles Todd (later Sir Charles Todd), Postmaster-General, Superintendent of Telegraphs and Government Astronomer, South Australia, joined together the two ends of a single wire linking Adelaide and Port Darwin.

Thus was completed one of the greatest engineering feats in the history of Australia, a telegraph line over 2,000 miles of almost unknown country linking Australia with the world beyond the horizon, erected only ten years after John McDouall Stuart had made the first crossing of the continent from south to north.

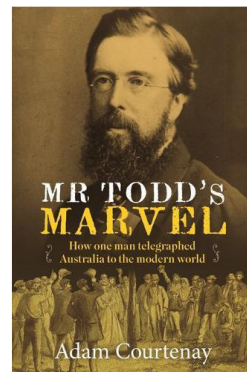
The Australian Post Office is proud of the tradition of service established by Charles Todd and his intrepid band of men.

*Today:* **THE AUSTRALIAN POST OFFICE STILL PIONEERS  
NEW AND DEPENDABLE METHODS OF COMMUNICATION.**

PM G. 59/6

Dear Members,

Our June speaker Adam Courtenay told the fascinating story of *Mr Todd's Marvel*. Charles Todd had a dream to build a telegraph line across Australia to connect it to the world and he achieved it well before modern technology as we know it. We take so much for granted today in communication and travel and it has been forgotten just how long it took to send a letter 'home' and receive an answer. Other than the very wealthy, most European settlers never saw their families again. The Overland Telegraph line changed this forever.



Take a tour of the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park. Discover the personal stories, stunning Art Deco architecture and commemorative symbolism behind the Anzac Memorial with a free one-hour guided highlights tour. Led by knowledgeable guides, the one-hour guided highlights tour explores the Memorial's architectural design that dates back to the 1930s, the more recent award-winning Centenary Extension commemorating over 100 years of service and the significance of the Memorial's many incredible sculptural features. The tour also includes the daily Service of Remem-

brance at 11am. After the tour, visit the Memorial's permanent exhibition to learn about the experiences of Australians who served in conflict and peacekeeping operations for over a century. From 1 May 2024, Highlights Tours will take place on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays at 10am and Saturdays at 1pm. Booking advisable.

Governor Bligh was one of the most colourful characters in the early New South Wales colony. However he was not the only strong and interesting member of the Bligh family. Journalist and author Sue Williams tells the unusual story of this strong woman. When her father William Bligh was offered the post of Governor of New South Wales, her mother Elizabeth did not wish to accompany him, fearing the long ocean voyage. Instead, Mary agreed to accompany her father to act as the Lady of the Government House with her husband John Putland to serve as William Bligh's aide-de-camp.



Hope to see you there.

Beverley Brooks

President

COSHA



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# Mr Todd's Marvel

*by Adam Courtenay*

When I started writing this book roughly a year ago, one of the things I asked myself was a simple question: Why should I call the Australian line a wonder, and not say the same thing about the line that stretched across America?

The east to west American telegraph line did not pass through six climatic zones. It passed through 'so-called' settled areas. It was roughly the same length but the Americans only needed to plant 27,000 poles. The rougher Australian terrain required 36,000.

By contrast, the top third of the Australian line was to be placed on the climatic equivalent of the Amazon Rain Forest. The middle third of the line was to be laid on the climatic equivalent of the Sahara Desert. The last third was the easiest, mostly through pasture land of the lower portion of South Australia.

The Australian line went through territory only one man, the great explorer John McDouall Stuart, had ever seen in its entirety before. So the line started out literally with a sense of blind ambition.

Charles Todd, the Victorian that he was, never seemed more than mildly perturbed by the logistics, the contrasting climates and the potential conflicts that might occur with our first nations people. And yet he never doubted the outcome. He had what we now call today the X factor – the ability to rouse men and sustain their ardour over a period of years.

But I don't think this story is just about geographic distance. I think this is about time. What the time lord and his men did was to synch Australia with the world. Suddenly businesses could hear about European, Asian or US markets in a day – information which once took seven weeks to get to us, now only took seven hours.

I personally believe that Todd's strongest motivation was related to his wife Alice.

In 1865, Alice Todd gave birth to a daughter Alice Maude Mary. Alice's father Edward died a few months after Alice Maude was born without ever receiving the news that he had a new grandchild. Later that year, Alice would receive a copy of his funeral service; the following year she received a letter saying that her brother Alfred had died – she had not even known he had been ill.

Her sister Sarah had been the source of most of her family news – and then in the English winter of 1867 she herself took ill with influenza and died. Alice told Charles she would have rushed to England if she had known her beloved sister was unwell. Not only had Alice been unable to inform her English relations of her own family additions in good time, she could not even know when members of her family had been lost – until far too late.



Erecting one of the 36,000 poles



This was always about time. When Todd finally linked Australia by telegraph to the world, Australia was running in time with everyone else.

But Australia had two factors that no other country had to contend with. The first was that nobody other than explorer John Stuart had seen the route the telegraph had to take from the bottom of the country to the top.

The second, which I think has been given short shrift in other books on the telegraph: whose territory are we going into and what would it mean for those people it encroaches upon?

There were three phases: wariness and aversion as the first; confrontation and attempts to drive out the intruders as the second, and a new engagement by both sides from about the 1880s onwards.

There was an initial phase of avoidance and fear – on both sides. Todd told his men in no uncertain terms that there would be as little fraternisation as possible. Whether this was exactly followed, is open to question.

There followed a phase of direct confrontation as Aboriginal groups felt the telegraph operators had wrongfully taken part of the resources from their land without any form of pay back. Europeans had brought a new and extraordinary resource that the first people had never seen but craved enormously – metal. The most confrontational period was in the mid 1870s. The local people felt, and probably rightfully so, that the intruders were not, as it were, paying their rent.

After that, there was the third phase – it's probably correct to say that a kind of peace ensued, from the 1880s onwards,

What we have always heard, of course, was the European version of events. Todd and the people around him never realised that the country bisected by the line was occupied and spoken for. They still felt that it was peopled by wandering nomads, who came and went, but had no real relationship with the land. How wrong they were.

Thus we hear from diaries of the time that the Aboriginal people were expert pilferers of stores and equipment. We never hear the converse – that the white men were similarly expert pilferers of land, wood and water.

Todd did not foresee – indeed nobody foresaw - the trouble to come. Within 18 months of the line's successful inauguration in 1872, three telegraph stations came under concerted attack. There had been numerous stories of Aboriginal people raiding stores and temporarily unoccupied camps and wagons, removing caches of wire, telegraph insulators and even the floor plates of telegraph poles.

Todd himself had found three Aboriginal axes made from the cast-iron footplates of the line. The porcelain insulators, when broken up, were the perfect material for fashioning spear points for knives.

Todd did what he could. He struck up a good relationship with one of the important coastal Mara elders, Bungawa, when he was at the Roper River. The relations between him and Bungawa's people were cordial.

Todd showed fairness and coolness under considerable pressure and he also made sure he adhered to his own guidelines. While he had a good relationship with the Mara, he never ventured into their camp for any extended period. He always kept the distance.

So how was it finally finished? There was a bit of a comic note when the south line finally met the north line.



Roper River, NT



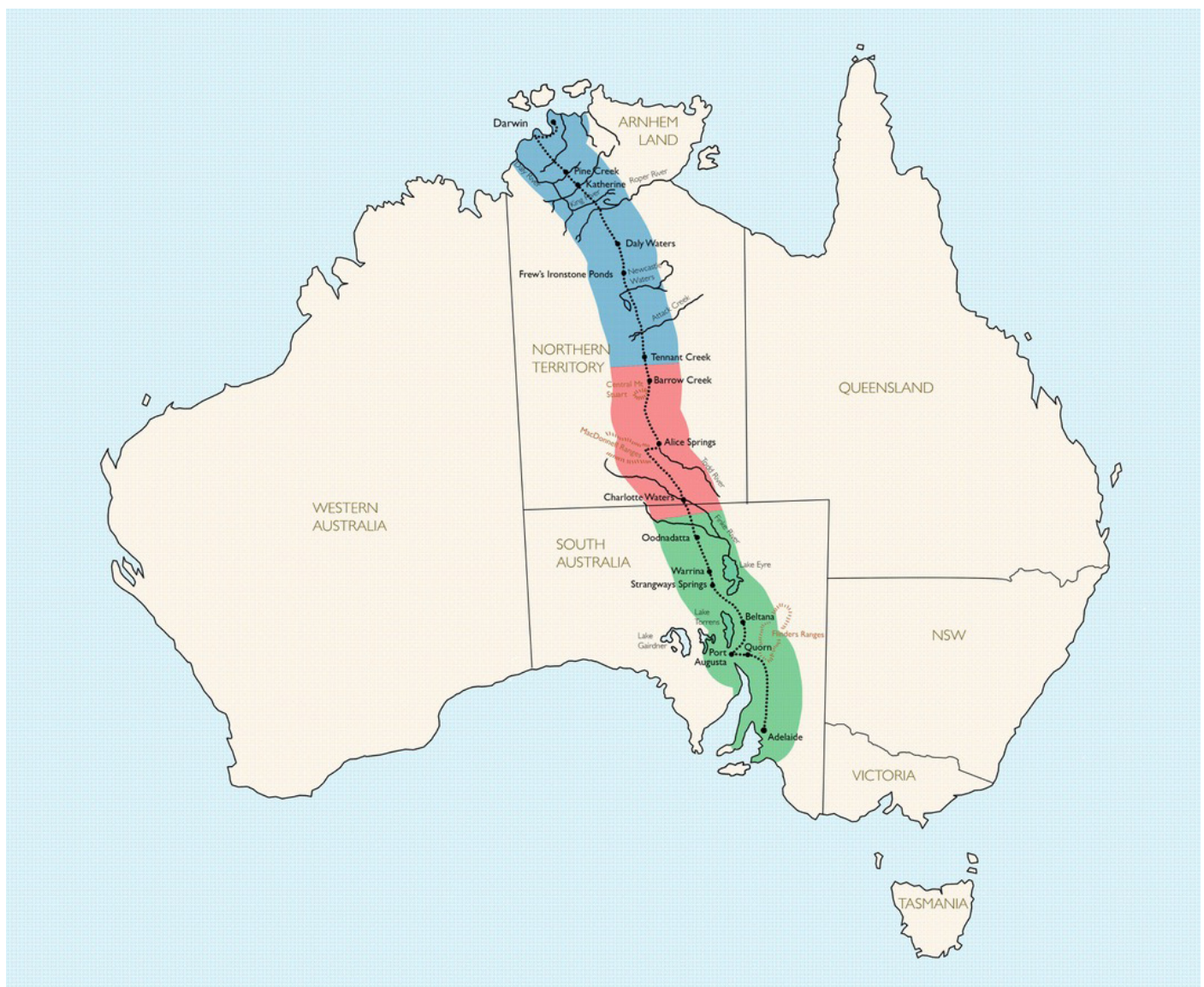
*On 9 August 1872, the last pole was planted but there were still a few minor problems and some gaps that had yet to be plugged. The meeting of the lines was scheduled for Thursday, 22 August. As the day drew nearer, Patterson was unwell, but to him was accorded the honour of the final joining. ...*

*He had the wire re-cut there so that he could symbolically bring the two sides together. On that day, there were telegraph operators poised at both ends of the continent, making sure that the signals worked going north and south.*

*All was prepared. Just before noon, Patterson, flanked by a number of men, took hold of one end of the broken line, while half a dozen men brought up the other end. But ... they had cut the line too short. The two sides could not physically join.*

*A furious Patterson reached for some binding wire, wrapping it around his hand and bringing it towards the other end. ... Patterson screamed and dropped the line. The current from the repeater stations had been in full flow – Patterson had been electrocuted. ... He returned to the scene, now using a handkerchief to seize the wire and within a few moments, Adelaide was in communication with Port Darwin. Men fired their own 21 gun salute from their revolvers and a bottle of brandy was broken over one of the poles.*

I find that Australians tend to celebrate our explorers, even if unsuccessful. The nation, however, has never celebrated a civil servant, nor have we ever feted an engineer. Charles Todd was both of these things and much more – he was a telegrapher, a meteorologist, an astronomer, an encyclopaedic scientist and a highly competent bushman. It is possibly these very talents that have made him less known today than he should be.



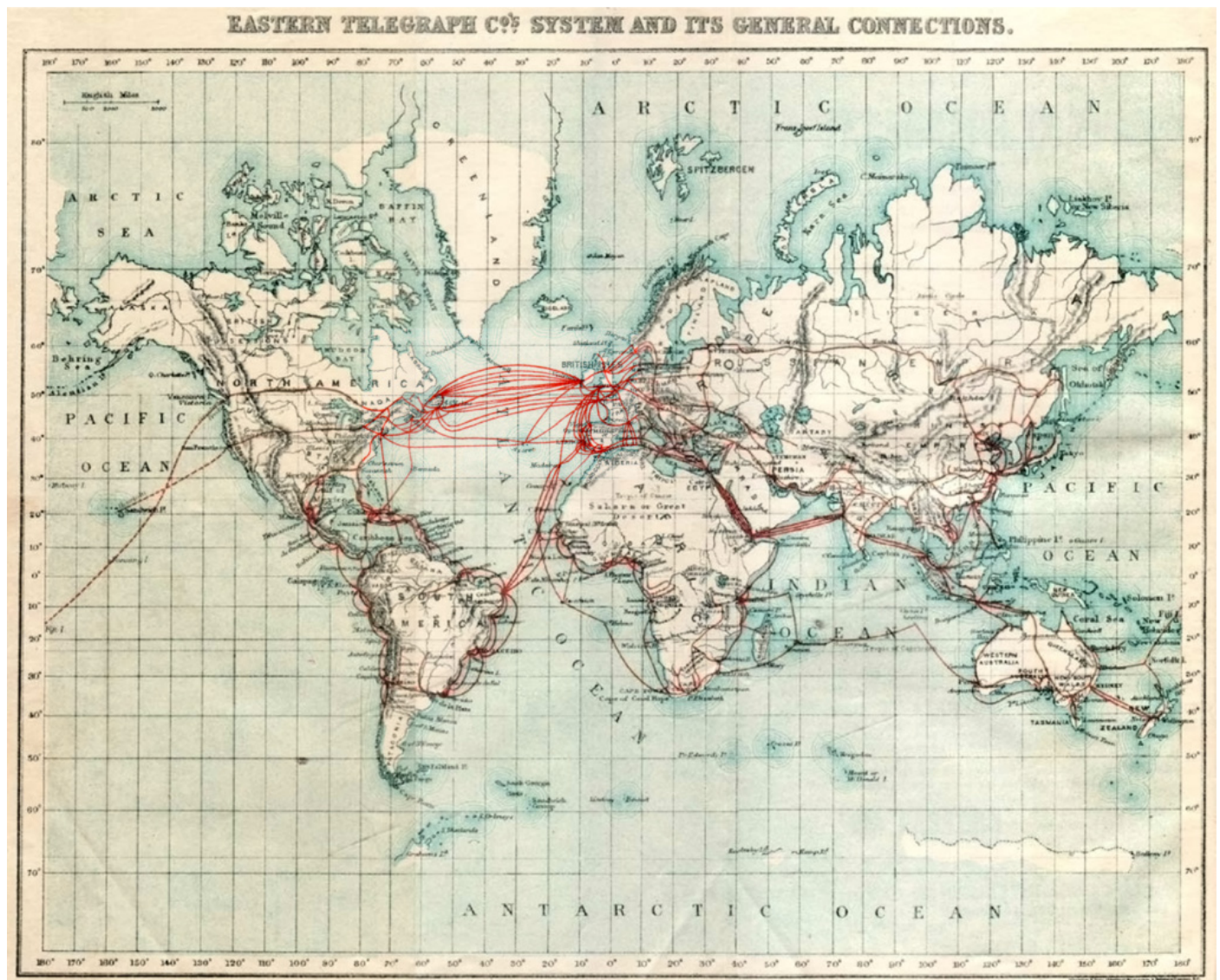
Overland Telegraph route showing the three climatic regions it had to pass through.



The OTL was never going to be the Sydney Harbour Bridge or the Opera House. And yet what Todd achieved was every bit as precarious and difficult as any of these and had a far greater impact on far more lives than either of them. The OTL was an engineering triumph admired for a short time and afterwards only remembered if it failed to do its job.

History gives us a context and a sense of proportion. Todd's personal intervention in the monsoonal Northern Territory and his good humour and flair for logistics were the very things that overcame both the geographic difficulties and the weakening morale of his men. His intervention was as decisive as any general that turned the tide of a war. It ensured the successful completion of one of the great engineering feats of 19th century Australia.

But I think it was something else that made him great. He had the common touch, speaking to Afghan camel riders and First Nations people as their equal. Nobody that figured into his grand scheme was ever taken for granted. He bunked down with his workers, ate the same rations and experienced the harshest aspects of the Australian bush. Todd's self-deprecation went to the next level: self-abnegation.



# Are you curious to know what your DNA reveals about your heritage?

Eureka Productions in association with Ancestry.com is researching an exciting new documentary series for a respected national broadcaster.

We are looking to tell Australia's history through a combination of genealogical research and DNA testing and would like to invite people who live and/or work in Surry Hills to take part.

This is a unique opportunity to be involved in a first-of-its-kind investigation and we would love to hear from you.

If you'd like to register your interest, please use the following link <https://casting.lumi.media/a5ba3507-e45b-46aa-a34a-e07b22b0fb5b/register>

Eureka is part of the global-reaching Fremantle Group and we have made a raft of successful programmes such as *Grand Designs Australia*, *Restoration Australia*, *The Recording Studio*, *This Is Going to Be Big* and *Tony Armstrong's Extra-Ordinary Things*.

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## Research Report

Celeste Radcliffe reports on recent research queries:

This month we received the following enquiry from Elanor, re 78-82 Wyndham Street, Alexandria

I am an archaeologist and heritage consultant conducting research into 78-82 Wyndham Street, Alexandria. From my research, the study area was located within a grant to William Hutchinson in 1823 and was subsequently subdivided and leased out on 99-year leases from 1855 onwards. By 1861, there appears to have been a house and shed used/owned by Henry Bryan(t). Sometime in the late 19th century, three workers' cottages appear to have been constructed on the site, but I can't find out when they were constructed. The building on the site is a 1963-1964 steel and pipe bending factory that has been converted into offices.

I was wondering if COSHA holds any records relating to the study area that aren't otherwise available on the City of Sydney Archives, HLRV or the State Library of NSW. Otherwise, if you have any hints for finding information on these sites or other sites, I would love to hear from you.

I am also interested in gauging the significance of the current factory at 78-82 Wyndham Street. Are you aware of any particular historical or cultural significance of the site? If not, do you know who I should contact to find out?

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

A response was sent back to her:

[1] Thank you for your enquiry. I am the research officer for COSHA and although we do not have any archives due to storage issues, I will research your queries and come back to you next week.

[2] Further to your enquiry, you should again contact the City of Sydney Council Historian as the property would have been originally under the South Sydney Council, but all its records are now held with the Sydney City Council.

All property ownership records are kept at the Land Titles Office which are now in Liverpool Street, Sydney. The LTO are also now online. There are a great deal of articles on the internet concerning this property as you are no doubt already aware. The CofSC now also have TROVE records which have all newspaper and magazine articles that you could find interesting. We wish you luck on your journey



# For Your Diary

*Bookings not required.*

## That Bligh Girl

Journalist Sue Williams returns to the untold stories of the women of colonial Sydney with another fascinating, meticulously researched historical novel.

Mary Bligh is no shrinking violet. After a horrific six-month sea voyage from Britain, she proves as strong-willed as her bloody-minded father, the newly appointed Governor William Bligh.

The pair scandalises Sydney with their personalities, politics, and her pantaloons. When three hundred armed soldiers of the Rum Rebellion march on Government House to depose him, the governor is nowhere to be seen. Instead, Mary stands defiantly at the gates, fighting them back with just her parasol.

Despite being bullied, belittled and betrayed, Mary remains steadfast, even when her desperate father double-crosses her yet again in his last-ditch attempt to cling to power. But will Mary turn out to be her father's daughter and deceive him in pursuit of her dreams and ambitions?

**Speaker:**

*Sue Williams*

**Date & time:**

*Saturday 13 July 2024 at 2.00pm*

**Location:**

*Henry Carmichael Theatre,  
Sydney Mechanics School of Arts  
280 Pitt Street, Sydney*

**Admission:**

*Members \$5 Visitors \$10*



## Dr. William Redfern

Learn about the extraordinary life of Dr. William Redfern, the convict who has a suburb named after him.

This captivating session, delivered by descendant Andrew Redfern, details the doctor's riches-to-rags-and-then-back-again story against the backdrop of early colonial Australia.

Hear about research that has uncovered remarkable stories involving extensive international travel, escaping death several times and associations with royalty. Recent testing of hair samples from the 1830s has led to further unexpected discoveries.

Don't miss this opportunity to uncover the legacy of Dr. William Redfern in a contemporary way.

**Speaker:**

*Adrew Redfern*

**Date & time:**

*Saturday 10 August 2024 at 2.00pm*

**Location:**

*Henry Carmichael Theatre,  
Sydney Mechanics School of Arts  
280 Pitt Street, Sydney*

**Admission:**

*Members \$5 Visitors \$10*

