

YIWARRA KUJU
THE
CANNING
STOCK ROUTE

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History of the Canning Stock Route



'The Route, when finished, would be about
the best watered stock route in [the] Colony.'

Alfred Canning, 1907



The Canning Stock Route is a 1850-kilometre long track running between Halls Creek and Wiluna in Western Australia. It is named after Alfred Wernam Canning who surveyed the route in 1906–07. With the assistance of unnamed Aboriginal people from many different language groups who lived along the route, he located water sources approximately one day's distance apart for a team of travelling stock and their drovers. In 1908 he returned to build the wells. There were 54 water sources of which 48 were constructed wells.

1 The origins of the stock route

The idea of the stock route began in 1905 in response to a monopoly that had arisen on the beef supply to Perth and the goldfields. This monopoly resulted in such high prices for beef that the government conducted a royal commission to investigate the issue of a 'meat ring'. Cattle from the East Kimberley were afflicted with ticks and were prohibited from travelling through the west of Western Australia in case they carried the ticks to unaffected cattle. The East Kimberley pastoralists were anxious to find a market for their cattle and the government was equally anxious to find competition for the current suppliers to bring prices down. James Isdell, an East Kimberley pastoralist and politician, raised the idea that the cattle tick would be unable to survive a desert crossing and lobbied the government to make a path through the desert. The government approved of this idea as it presented a way out of their meat supply problem, and an expedition was then planned to survey the country between Wiluna and Halls Creek. The country through which the pastoralists and the government proposed to run the stock encompassed parts of the Great Sandy Desert, the Little Sandy Desert and the Gibson Desert. The final route transected the Countries of the Aboriginal people of many different language groups.

Why the 'Canning' Stock Route?

Alfred Wernam Canning was the man selected to survey the route. Canning was born in Victoria and been a cadet surveyor in New South Wales. He joined the Western Australian Lands Department in 1893 and proved himself to be a reliable surveyor. In 1901 he successfully surveyed the line for the rabbit-proof fence — a journey of 1822 kilometres which began at Starvation Harbour, west of Esperance, and headed due north to Wallal, a point roughly halfway between Port Hedland and Broome. Canning's new instructions were to find a route from Wiluna to Halls Creek with water supplies one day's bullock journey apart, which could supply water for up to 800 head of cattle.

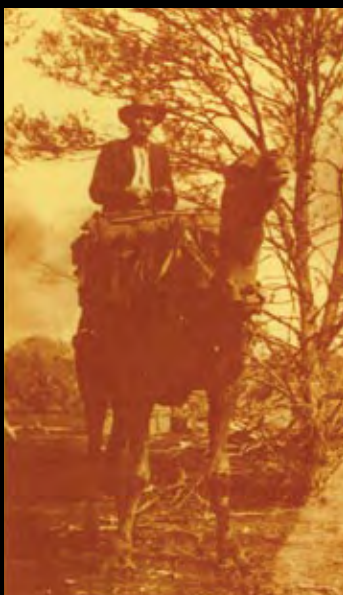
This country had been travelled before by the Calvert Expedition, led by Lawrence Wells, and by explorer David Carnegie in 1896. Wells stated that the country was of no use for anything except spinifex. Carnegie explored the possibility of a stock route between Coolgardie and the Kimberley but his route carried him through the Gibson Desert before arriving in the Great Sandy Desert. Three of his camels died from eating poisonous plants and one of his party accidentally shot himself dead. Carnegie concluded 'that a stock route through the desert is impracticable we have clearly demonstrated'. He called it a 'vast howling wilderness ... so barren and destitute of vegetation ... that one marvels how even camels could pick up a living'. (D Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand*, pp. 432, 249)

Both Wells and Carnegie created a precedent with their treatment of Aboriginal people. Both Wells and Carnegie used ropes to tie them up so that they would continue to receive their help; in Carnegie's case, finding water; in Wells's case, finding the two lost members of their party. Carnegie also deprived his Aboriginal captives of water or fed them salt beef so that they would lead him to water more quickly, although he was publicly criticised for this at the time. There is evidence to show that Canning had read the accounts of both expeditions and, on his own expedition, explicitly followed Carnegie's example.

1 Plan of stock route exploration, by AW Canning, Western Australian Land Information Authority (Landgate)



2 **Canning Stock Route and Surrounding Country**, 2008, by Kumpaya Girgaba, Ngamaru Bidu, Mabel Warkarta, Nola Taylor, Thelma Judson, Marjorie Yates, Dulcie Gibbs, Yuwali Janice Nixon, Rosie Williams, Nora Nangapa, Bugai Whylouter, Nora Wompi, Jakayu Biljabu and Morika Biljabu, Martumili Artists, National Museum of Australia



3 Alfred Canning on camel, courtesy State Library of Western Australia, The Batty Library

Canning and the Aboriginal guides

From the beginning, Canning planned to use Aboriginal people to lead him to the water, soaks and springs. He took neck chains and handcuffs with him to ensure that his local Aboriginal 'guides' stayed with the party for as long as he needed them. They were chained up overnight, and on one occasion a man's wife was chained in order to lead him to water. It was largely with the help of these Aboriginal people that the expedition was successful in finding the water to supply the route.

- 3** The expedition (a team of 23 camels, two horses, and eight white men) travelled 1850 kilometres. They left Wiluna in April 1906 and on 1 November arrived at Halls Creek from where Canning sent his triumphant telegram.

One of the members of the expedition, camp cook Edward Blake, disapproved of Canning's treatment of the Aboriginal people during the survey expedition especially with regard to the treatment of women. Blake took his concerns to authorities in Perth and Canning's treatment of the 'Natives' became the subject of a royal commission in 1908.

Some of the soaks and springs along the route were both secret and sacred. It is likely that the Aboriginal people led Canning's party away from those, ultimately dictating the shape of the route by their choices.

Canning was ultimately cleared by the Royal Commission both on the strength of his achievement and on the fact that it was only Blake's word against his. He was then commissioned to return to the desert to construct wells where necessary to ensure reliable access to the water. There were originally 48 wells constructed between 1908 and 1910. These wells were constructed either near or on top of Aboriginal soaks and springs. Many of them were deepened and had their sides straightened in the manner of the traditional construction of European wells.

Edward Blake predicted that one of the results of Canning's treatment of the Aboriginal people would be reprisals towards stockmen once they used the route. In fact, the first conflict along the route happened on the survey party's return journey.

Michael Tobin, the well-boring expert, was attacked by an Aboriginal man, Mungkututu. Tobin fired his rifle but Mungkututu had already discharged his spear. Both men died in the encounter. Various reasons were put forward to explain the tragedy, ranging from accusations of theft of women and objects to a simple matter of surprise. Whatever the reason, the conclusion of Hubert Trotman who was 'in charge of handling the natives' on the survey expedition seems most apt:

There is no doubt that both men had been the victims of fear.

Hubert Trotman, evidence before the 1908 royal commission

Conflict on the stock route

In 1911 the bodies of the first stockmen to use the route, Shoesmith, Thompson and an Aboriginal man called 'Chinaman', were discovered by Thomas Cole who followed the route a short time after them. Rumours abounded that Cole had taken revenge by shooting Aboriginal people along the route but they were not verified. An expedition led by Sergeant RH Pilmer was sent out in 1911 to bring to justice those considered to be the perpetrators. This expedition was considered a success as some Aboriginal people were killed in a skirmish near the site of the murders.

Most of the guilty men had reaped their just desserts, and the others were well on the wing.

RH Pilmer, 1911

A later report has it that the police party was poorly led, travelling a set number of miles per day and ignoring the local knowledge of suitable camel camps.

Consequently, the camels suffered badly and no natives were caught.

Len Talbot, 2008



4 Alfred Wernam Canning, courtesy State Library of Western Australia, The Battye Library

4 Using the wells

Despite the police expedition, drovers were afraid to use the route and it was largely unused for the next 20 years. By 1917 most of the wells had been dismantled by Aboriginal people as they reclaimed access to the water. Canning's construction method required the use of camels to pull heavy buckets up from the bottom of the well. When William Snell was commissioned to repair the wells in 1929 one of his personal commitments was to make the wells more accessible to Aboriginal people by the use of ladders:

Natives cannot draw water from the Canning Stock Route wells ... It takes three strong white men to land a bucket of water ... It is beyond the natives power to land a bucket. They let go the handle some times escape with their life but get an arm and head broken in the attempt to get away ... To heal the wounds so severely inflicted and [as] a safeguard against the natives destroying the wells again I equipped the wells ... so that the native can draw water from the wells without destroying them.

William Snell, 1930

Snell noticed that where access to water was made easier the wells were undamaged.

William Snell abandoned the venture at Well 35. Various sources report that it became too much for him or that he ran out of materials. Canning himself was recalled at nearly 70 years of age to finish the job over the years 1930–31. Evidence suggests that where Snell had had no trouble in his encounters with Aboriginal people, Canning had trouble straight away.

Droving along the stock route

From 1931 until 1959 there was droving activity up and down the route and it was refurbished during the Second World War in case it was needed for emergency evacuation from the north due to a possible invasion. In all there were only about 25 'droves' along the route and it never achieved the potential hoped for by its initiators. According to Talbot, none of the really big Kimberley cattlemen ever sent their cattle down the route and a drover named Ben Taylor estimated that the carrying capacity of stock on the route was only 600 head of cattle — 200 fewer than the initial stipulation. This also undermines Canning's initial assertion upon completing the route in 1907. By contrast, the greatest and most lasting impact of the route was upon the Aboriginal people through whose Country it was built.

Once the stock route was in place it offered a corridor for Aboriginal people to move up and down the Country. There were far more Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal stockmen on the route, and Aboriginal women became stockwomen or camp cooks. Aboriginal people became noted for their outstanding ability in stock-work, even though for most of their droving time they received no cash payment for their work. Others followed their stock-droving families up and down the route as they moved from settlement to settlement, and from station to station where the work was. In consequence, many families were dispersed widely throughout the Western Desert.

The history of the Canning Stock Route has been written by non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have had their own way of telling that history through stories and art, but the opportunity to tell it to a wider audience has not been possible until recently.

Questions and activities to share with your students

1. What is the Canning Stock Route and why was it given this name?
2. Why did the Western Australian government commission the stock route?
3. Who was Alfred Canning and what was he asked to do?
4. What methods did Canning use to obtain 'cooperation' from Aboriginal people who accompanied his party?
5. What is a royal commission and why was one appointed?
6. Why was Canning found to be innocent by the royal commission? Are you surprised by this finding? Explain your answer.
7. Was the stock route a success in your opinion? Explain your answer.
8. In other parts of this resource you will discover how Aboriginal people who lived in this part of Australia were affected by the stock route. At this stage, what do you think the main impacts may have been? Return to your answer after you have read the material and make any necessary changes.

(front image) Kilangkilang, one of the fresh water lakes at the northern end of the stock route, photo by Tim Acker, 2007