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The legacy of Alfred Canning



Alfred Canning was chosen to lead the survey of the Canning Stock Route because he was regarded as an excellent surveyor and bushman. Yet when he returned his actions were the subject of a royal commission, set up to enquire into the treatment of the 'Natives' during the expedition.



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



2 Section of Rabbit Proof Fence, National Museum of Australia



3 Helen Hill on the Stock Route, photo by Tim Acker



4 Aboriginal stockman from Billiluna working cattle, photo by Joe Mahood, about 1969

1 Who was Alfred Canning?

Alfred Wernam Canning was born in 1860 in Victoria. He was educated at Carlton College, Melbourne, and went on to become a cadet surveyor in the New South Wales Lands Department. He qualified as a surveyor in 1882 and worked in Bega, Cooma and Bathurst. He married in Sydney in 1884 and he and his wife had one son. In 1893 he moved to Western Australia and quickly established himself as an excellent bushman and a reliable surveyor.

- 2 From 1900 to 1905 Canning surveyed the line for the rabbit-proof fence (also known as the State Barrier Fence No. 1) which is a pest-exclusion fence constructed between 1901 and 1907 to keep rabbits and other agricultural pests out of Western Australian pastoral areas. The rabbit-proof fence ran straight northwards from Starvation Harbour (166 kilometres west of Esperance) to Wallal (257 kilometres north of Port Hedland). On one occasion, when Canning's camel died under him after 68 km of travel, he had to walk 64 km to the telegraph station at Wallal and the full 129 km back to rejoin his party — exactly where he expected to find them — a round journey of 193 km.

What were the immediate effects of the rabbit-proof fence?

One of the early results of the rabbit-proof fence was the community of Jigalong in the Little Sandy Desert. Jigalong was initially a ration station supplying workers constructing or maintaining the rabbit-proof fence. During a severe drought in the 1920s Aboriginal people discovered there was food available from the ration station and some moved there to survive the drought. A Protestant mission was built on the site in 1947.

How did Canning survey the stock route ?

Following the success of Canning's survey for the rabbit-proof fence, he received instructions to find a permanently watered stock route from Wiluna to the Kimberley. Earlier expeditions had passed this way, such as the Calvert Scientific Exploring Expedition and the Carnegie Expedition. Before Canning started his survey for the stock route he read their accounts to find out about the country and the use of Aboriginal people with regard to finding water. Both of them gave accounts of desperately unforgiving and difficult terrain.

- 3 *A vast howling wilderness of high, spinifex clad ridges of red sand, so close together that in a days march we crossed from sixty to eighty ridges, so steep that often the camels had to crest them on their knees, and so barren and destitute of vegetation (saving spinifex) that one marvels how even camels could pick up a living.*

David Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand*, pp. 249–50

Pushing on during the afternoon, the natives running ahead and standing in any shade they could find to avoid the hot sand, we crossed over wretched country, consisting of high and steep sandridges, desert gums and porcupine, [spinifex bush] for the whole distance.

L Wells, *Journal of the Calvert Expedition*, 1897

- 4 Carnegie gave an account of how he induced an Aboriginal man to take them to water.

Guarded on one side by Breden, I on the other, we plied our new friend with salt beef, both to cement our friendship and promote thirst, in order for that for his own sake he should not play us false. In any case, so long as he was with us, we must some time get water — and we had not intention of letting him escape. With a rope we secured him and watched in turn all through the night.

David Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand*, p. 189

Before Canning left Perth, he had a telegraph sent to the police station at Wiluna to organise the loan of an:

ordinary chain ... which they use for natives and also handcuffs.

Alfred Canning, evidence before the 1908 royal commission

Canning had apparently decided to follow Carnegie's lead. The team that left Wiluna to begin the survey consisted of Alfred Canning, Hubert Trotman, Edward Blake, Michael Tobin, Joseph Tobin, Otto Baumgarten, Tom Burke and Robert Moody. Trotman had been Canning's second-in-command on the rabbit-proof fence expedition, and Blake had also been a member of the expedition. Blake and Trotman had had a falling out on that expedition and the pair did not get along. On the return journey Michael Tobin, the water borer, was speared at Natawalu.

Here are two accounts of the incident:

We saw a native running towards us ... fully armed. He was watching Tobin all the time ... and just as the native moved with his spear Tobin raised his rifle and fired just after the native had discharged his spear which entered Tobin's right breast. The native fell.

Alfred Canning, evidence before the 1908 royal commission

At Natawalu an Aboriginal man speared a kartiya [white man], then that kartiya got a rifle and shot him. Right [at] Natawalu. Before there was a well there. That's the place I painted now. He was just coming to get water ... then he saw that kartiya. He speared him then, near the water.

Mayapu Elsie Thomas

Why was there a royal commission into the stock route expedition?

After completing the survey of the proposed stock route Canning faced a royal commission into his treatment of the Aboriginal people during the expedition. On his return to Perth, Edward Blake had written a letter to the Minister for Mines on the recommendation of the Protector of Aborigines, outlining his concerns about the treatment of Aboriginal people by members of the expedition and demanding an inquiry. His principal concerns actually lay more with Trotman, Canning's second-in-command. Blake felt Canning should have curbed bad behaviour by expedition members but did nothing.

There were certain things which went on in that expedition that in my opinion were not altogether proper.

Edward Blake, letter to the Hon G Gregory, August 1907

The Minister began inquiries but failed to respond either to Blake's first or second letter. As a result, Blake thought the government was not doing anything and took his story to the papers. The stories that ran in the newspapers led Canning to request an enquiry himself so that his name could be cleared.

Issues addressed by the royal commission:

- *Forcing the natives to accompany the party.*
- *Chaining by the neck natives who had done nothing to deserve being deprived of their liberty when a horse guard would have been sufficient.*
- *Unnecessarily depriving natives of their water supply by deepening and squaring their native wells rendering it impossible for old men, women and piccaninnies (children) to reach the water, and causing the water to be polluted by animals falling in.*
- *Hunting native women on foot and horseback, sometimes with rifles, for immoral purposes.*
- *Using threats and giving bribes to native men to induce them to direct their women to have connection with the members of the expedition.* 1908 royal commission, p.3

Every member of the party except Blake denied any wrongdoing, and instead stated that Blake was apt to make up stories. Of the 16 witnesses called to give evidence, only three thought that it was cruel and unnecessary to get help from Aboriginal people by chains and force, and these people were not connected to the expedition.

Only one Aboriginal man was called to give evidence. Harry (Aboriginal man from Wiluna):

White man tell Yarry go in bush away from camel to get bardie? — No, Yarry walk close to camel.

Yarry (Harry) tied up? — yes (chain produced).

How Yarry tied up? — (witness points to his neck).

What did the royal commission decide?

Despite the three who thought it cruel, the commissioners ultimately found that Canning had been prudent to use Aboriginal people as he did, as it showed that he was considering the experiences of previous explorers in ensuring the safety of his party and the effectiveness of the expedition.

Your Commissioners feel that in his natural endeavours to provide against disaster he would consider the wise precautions of preceding explorers, and by so doing, not only ensure the safety of his party but an expeditious performance of the work entrusted to him.

Final summary, 1908 royal commission

The charges of immorality were found to be inconclusive because of the lack of independent evidence (because none of the survey party agreed with Blake) and because Blake withdrew any charges against Canning personally. The commissioners found that the charges were the result of Blake's imagination coupled with a 'desire of injuring Mr Trotman'.

Thus cleared by the commission of wrongdoing, Alfred Canning returned to the stock route in 1908 to build the wells. Trotman accompanied him on this expedition, but returned to Perth afterwards and stayed on as a land assessor for the state government. Blake retired into obscurity, writing letters every so often to complain of his ill-use at the hands of the government.

Two views of surveying the stockroute:

As far as I could see they rather looked upon following us along and showing us water as a sort of picnic, because they hunted the whole way and I used to shoot a number of rats and they took the very keenest interest in the hunt. [But] at night time you could not rely on them. If you turned your head away they were gone ... There was one case where a native played a confidence trick on us very quickly ... He drew all the different waters and pointed out the different directions, and then he went ... and made his own breakwind, lit his own fire, and sat down as contentedly as possible ... I was sitting down practically looking straight at him. He was not three yards away and I just took a few notes and then looked up and he had gone without any reason apparently.

Alfred Canning, evidence before the 1908 royal commission

You're trespassing on other people's Country, other people's land. You know that word you say, 'trespassing'? You can't trespass on other people's property. You're breaking the law. Because we've got our own law and where the boundary ends it's the songlines you follow. That's what the old people showed us. The old people keep it in their head. 'This songline. Ah, that's where my boundary finishes.' And that person in that group where they're having a ceremony, 'Oh, his boundary now, he can sing that area, that's his Country.'

Some people might have been forced to go there and when they been get to that 'nother area, might be they been get frightened two sides: from other tribe — because they been come from 'nother place — and from kartiya [white man] side same time. That's why kartiya might have been chain them every night time, so they can't get away.

Jawuriji Mervyn Street, 2007



The late Friday Jones sitting on Forrest's Fort, Well 9, Canning Stock Route, photo by Tim Acker, 2007

Why did Canning use the chains?

Re the handcuffing of a gin; it was only done with the hope that the buck would return, he having run away with the chain (which was necessary we should get for future use) ... In conclusion I might add that the natives were treated with every consideration throughout, and as far as their wells are concerned they have a much better supply and easier access than if we never visited them.

Alfred Canning, letter, 1907

It is most probable that the friction that lay between Canning and the Aboriginal people along the stock route was indeed the result of Canning's treatment of them. In Western Australia, the Aboriginal people were controlled by the *Aborigines Act 1905 (WA)*. Under this Act Aboriginal people faced a number of restrictions and were placed under the care of the 'Chief Protector of Aborigines' who was empowered by the Act to manage any property an Aboriginal person might have, and to be the legal guardian of any child of Aboriginal or half-Aboriginal descent until they were 16 years old. At that time in Australia Aboriginal people were seen as being less important than non-Aboriginal people. In Canning's understanding therefore — as well as in the royal commissioners' — chaining the Aboriginal people was necessary to keep them with him and therefore an acceptable thing to do.

What is the Aboriginal perspective?

Although only one Aboriginal person gave evidence at the royal commission Canning's exploits passed into Aboriginal history.

They been getting all the black people. They tie him up. One by one they let 'im go. They let him go and they follow him 'til they find that rockhole. They make a well there.

Billy Patch (Mr P), 2007

Alfred Canning, grab Martu, hold him days, let him go and follow him up, and dug the well all the way long. [They call Canning] a hero. He was cunning ... tricking [the] Martu. Alright, different history from me. Martu history is straightforward.

Jeffrey James, 2007

What became of Alfred Canning?

After finishing the well-building Alfred Canning became district surveyor for Perth in 1912. In 1923 his adult son Robert died and Canning retired from full-time work but continued as a casual surveyor. When William Snell, the man hired to refurbish the wells in 1929, could not continue the work, Alfred Canning was commissioned to finish the contract. He was nearly 70 years old. Five years later, Alfred Canning died as a result of a progressive muscular wasting disease.

What is Canning's legacy today?

A legacy of Canning's rabbit-proof fence widely known to non-Aboriginal people is its role in guiding three young girls home as they walked to Jigalong from the Moore River Native Settlement near Perth. This became famous in the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The fence remained as a barrier against rabbits until the introduction of myxomatosis in the 1950s. The legacy of the stock route is more complex. It has become part of Australian frontier folklore although many regard it as a heroic failure.

For Aboriginal people, the legacy is more profound. It is a legacy of conflict and survival, of exodus and return. For the people who belong to this Country, history is never past but lives on in the land today. Aboriginal artists from across Western Australia have returned to their traditional Country to paint and narrate their versions of that history.

Questions and activities to share with your students

1. Why was Canning chosen to lead the expedition?
2. How did Canning approach the challenge of finding water in the desert?
3. Why was it necessary to convene a royal commission to enquire into the treatment of Aboriginal people during the expedition?
4. What did the royal commission decide? What were the reasons it gave for making this decision? Do you think it was a fair decision? Explain your reasons. Why do you think Aboriginal people suddenly left the expedition?
5. Find out about the rights of Aboriginal people in the different states and territories after 1901. [The National Museum of Australia has a number of resources that can help you with this investigation. Go to www.nma.gov.au/education/school_resources/indigenous/]
6. What do you think is important about the legacy of Alfred Canning?