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.
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 surveyor in the New South Wales Police Forces. He became a cadet surveyor in the New South Wales Police Forces. He qualified as a surveyor in 1884 and worked in Inga, 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 businessman and a reliable surveyor.

From 1900 to 1905 Canning surveyed the line for the rabbit-proof fence (also known as the State Barrier fence), the most ambitious construction project in Australian history. Canning was the chief surveyor for this project, which was completed between 1901 and 1907 to keep rabbits and other pests out of Western Australian pastoral areas. The rabbit-proof fence ran straight northwards from Stirling (across the 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 his party — exactly where he expected to find them on 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 undertake a permanent stock route from Wiluna to the Kimberley. Earlier expeditions had passed this way, such as the Calvert Scientific Expedition and the Carnegie Expedition. Before Canning left, Blake had already ordered some 400 to 500 camels to Yarrabooda, and so there was no need to find out about the country and the use of Aboriginal people with regard to finding water. Both of them gave assurances of desperately unfavouring and difficult terrain.

A vast howling wilderness of high, spinifex clad ridges of red sand, so close together that in a day’s march we crossed from sixty to eighty ridges, so steep that even 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, Spindler and Sand, pp. 249-50

Pushing on during the afternoon, the natives running ahead and shouting in any noise that they could make. The sound of the song and the noise of the camels was so close that it was difficult to hear ourselves coming. We crossed over a world of country, consisting of high and steep sandhills, desert gums and porcupine, [spinifex bush] for the whole distance.

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

Guards on one side by Breaden, I on the other, we led our new friend with salt beef, both to cement our friendship and provide thirst, in order for that his own ways 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, Spindler and Sand, p. 119

When did the royal commission decide the actions of Canning?

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 been very much taken by the information for the native people’s ways of finding water. He 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 concern actually lay more with Trotman, Canning’s second-in-command. Blake felt Canning should have curbed bad behaviour by expedition members but did nothing.

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 walls. Trotman accompanied him on this expedition, but returned to Perth afterwards. Canning built 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 practical joke on us as very quickly … He drew all the different waters and pointed out the different directions, and then he went … and made his own blanket, lit his fire, and set 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 covered.

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’re trespassing 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 songline you follow. That’s what the old people showed us, and 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 to get to that ‘nother area, maybe they been get frightened two sides: from other tribe — because they been come from ‘nother place — and from kartya [white man] side at same time. That’s why kartya might have been chain them every night time, so they can’t get away.

Jawarij Mervyn Street, 2007

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

Section of Rabbit Proof Fence, national Museum of Australia

Neller Hill on the Stock Route, Matt by Ian Abot

Aboriginal stockman from Wiluna working cattle, photo by I.M. Abbot, about 1965

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 Lomas and Bill Blakes. Blakes and Trotman had had a falling out that expedition and the pair did not get along. On the return journey Michael Tobin, the water bore, was spared at Natalwala.

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 changed his spear which entered Tobin’s right breast. The native fell.

Alfred Canning, evidence before the 1908 royal commission

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

Mayapu Eise Thomas

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

After the completion of the survey the team returned to Natalwala to camp. Canning’s camel died and Tobin and Trotman told Canning to put the native down. Canning argued against the action, considering the safety of his party but an expeditious performance of the expedition. As a result, Canning asked the expedition’s Pty Ltd to provide against disaster he would consider the wise precautions to take 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 practical joke on us as very quickly … He drew all the different waters and pointed out the different directions, and then he went … and made his own blanket, lit his fire, and set 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 covered.

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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 Public Service in 1882 and worked in Bega, Cooma and Bathurst. He married in Sydney in 1884 and he and his wife had one son. In 1885 he moved to Western Australia and quickly established himself as an excellent bushman and a reliable surveyor.

From 1900 to 1905 Canning surveyed the line for the rabbit-proof fence (also known as the State Barriers fence or No. 1). He was part of a large group, including 13 Aboriginal men with him to do the surveying. The Aboriginal men were used as surveyors to help Canning and his team. They were paid $1 per day for their work but were not given proper equipment, which included a packhorse each to carry their gear.

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 Taylor, and three Aborigines, including the Aborigine who had led them down the path. Blake and Trotman had had a falling out that expedition and the pair did not get along. On the return journey Michael Tobin, the water bore, 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 dropped 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 karinya [white man], then that karinya got a rifle and shot him. Right [at] Natawalu. Before there was a well there. That’s the place I pointed now. He was just coming to get water … then he saw that karinya. He speared him then, near the water.

Mayrup Else Thomas

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 permanent stock route from Wiluna to the Kimberley. Earlier expeditions had passed this way, such as the Salent Scientific Expedition and the Carnegie Expedition. Before Canning started his expedition, he had to find a route that would be free from Aboriginal peoples. He surveyed the route in detail, devoting much time to finding the best possible route.

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 and porcupine, [spinifex bush] for the whole distance.

David Carnegie, Spinifex and Sand, pp. 249-50

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

T Wells, Journal of the Calvert Expedition, 1897

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

Guarded on one side by Breaden, I sat on the other, we plied our new friend with salt beef, both to cement our friendship and promise him, in order for that 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. 119

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

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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 altogether improper.

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 them to extract water.
• Removing native women from their homes, and sometimes by force, and these people were not connected to the expedition.

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):

Harry told me they got a good night’s sleep from a camel to a camel — and they had a fire. They have a fire, don’t they? Harry (Harry) died up — yes (chain produced).

How Harry died up? — (witness points to his neck).

What did the royal commission decide?

Despite the three who thought it cruel, the commissioners unanimously found that Canning had been prudent in his use of 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 preserve against disaster he would consider the 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 walls. Trotman accompanied him on this expedition, but returned to Perth after a dispute with the new Minister for Mines and 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. [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 so we quickly … He drew all the different waters and pointed out the different directions, and then he went … and made his own breakwind. In his own fire, and sat down as contentedly as possible … I was sitting down practically looks like a native … You couldn’t trust a native. He was not three yards away and I just took a few notes and then looked up and he had gone without any notice.

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’re trespassing on other people’s property. You’re breaking the law. Because we’ve got our own land 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, ‘Ah, his boundary now, he can say that area, that’s his Country.’

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