

# CONSTRUCTING AUSTRALIA

TEACHERS NOTES

## A Wire Through the Heart

Politics, tragedy and conquest combine in stories behind the building of Australia.

*The Bridge, Pipe Dreams* and *A Wire Through the Heart* combine rare archival images with dramatic storytelling in showcasing three landmark events that would allow Australia to mark its place in the world. The Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Kalgoorlie Pipeline and the Overland Telegraph line were engineering triumphs, but the human drama in constructing Australia is even more fascinating...



FilmAustralia  
Making History

## A Wire Through the Heart



### SYNOPSIS

The story of the struggle to cross a vast continent and build the telegraph line that would bring Australia to the world and the world to Australia.

In the mid 1800s Australia was a land isolated by distance and divided between two very different cultures. John McDouall Stuart, a migrant from Scotland, was determined to cross the centre of Australia and reach the north coast. His success would pave the way for a communications revolution.

Charles Todd had dreamt of constructing a telegraph line through the heart of the continent and in Stuart he found the man who could prove the inhospitable centre could be crossed. The telegraph's construction heralded the start of a new communications era every bit as revolutionary as the internet. News from overseas arrived in hours rather than months, securing Adelaide's position as the centre for early colonial communications.

It made Todd a hero, but Stuart, the man who made it possible, was destroyed by the hardships he had endured and died in obscurity.

### CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels and for lifelong learning. Curriculum links include English, Media Studies and SOSE/HSIE, particularly in History.

### SETTING THE SCENE

After viewing the program, carry out some of the following introductory activities.

- Construct a timeline of the important events referred to during the program, and any other events you consider relevant to an understanding of the opening up of communications between Australia and the world via telegraph. Begin with the arrival of John McDouall Stuart in Australia in 1838 and conclude in 1872 with the connection of Charles Todd's telegraph line to the British Telegraph submarine cable extending from Java (in Indonesia). Add a paragraph outlining what you believe to be the importance of this concluding historical moment both to Australians at the time and today.
- On large poster paper draw a map of Stuart's journey from south to north of the Australian continent. Research then note on the map significant places, regions and natural environments, geographic formations and vegetation Stuart and his team passed through, including traditional Indigenous lands. Also note general regional rainfall and temperatures for the time of the year Stuart travelled across the land mass.
- Working in pairs, also use poster paper to draw a map of Todd's coast-to-coast telegraph line. Include important features encountered today along the route, such as towns and cities, roads and railway lines. Research then add details of interest about the telegraph, such as total cost, converting it to what it would be today in Australian dollars; equipment and personnel required; living and working conditions of labourers on site; supply and transportation issues (for example, food and beverage supplies, and the poles required for telegraph masts).
- Research and draw a map of the main features of Adelaide around the time Charles and Alice Todd arrived there in 1855. Find out more about Adelaide and its population in the mid-19th century, then write a short general description of colonial life at that time for most of the city's citizens. For example, what were the main choices and types of employment? Was Adelaide a violent, male-oriented, heavy-drinking society? Was life for women difficult? Was Adelaide primarily made up of British-born subjects? Did it attract immigrants and former convicts?
- In pairs or small groups carry out some technical research then plan and create an illustrated magazine article aimed at young teenagers on how telegraphic messages are transmitted and received. You will need to include a description of how Morse code works. The general thrust of your article may be how the telegraph was an essential forerunner of modern computer and internet telecommunications, without which, where would we be today?

## COMMUNICATIONS AND ISOLATION IN AUSTRALIA, PRE-1870S

As the program tells us, a sea voyage between England and Australia took six months (although this time was shortened as steam-powered ships were developed and refined during the 19th century). This meant that it was impossible to know what was happening on the far side of the world (where the bulk of the population derived from) until months later.

- Discuss in class the ways in which it may be argued a 'typically' Australian character, behaviour trait or attitude developed as a result of being largely cut off from the so-called 'mother country', England, for nearly a century, looking at both the positive and negative aspects. For example, while non-Indigenous Australians may have learnt to be self-reliant and resourceful in many ways, did it also mean that they were more inward-looking, prejudiced and ignorant of the outside world and towards other cultures? After discussion, present your own views in a short article.
- Place yourself in the shoes, metaphorically, of a young married Englishwoman such as Alice Todd, arriving in the Australian colonies in 1855, knowing that when you post a letter to your family in England it may be nearly a year before you receive a reply. Plan and write a set of personal diary entries about your feelings, perhaps your sense of separation, and your excitement at the awareness that the next mail ship, carrying news from home, is approaching port.
- Before the coming of the across-Australia telegraph in 1872, much shorter, more local telegraph lines had been built in various parts of the country. In pairs, carry out research into the early history of Australian telecommunications and write a report on when and where other telegraph lines were constructed prior



to the 1870s, whether any of them were inter-linked into networks (or in fact if it was even possible to link them), and whether they were state-owned or privately financed and owned (for example, by newspaper proprietors).

- As we learn from the program, for a short time from the late 1850s to the 1870s newspaper reporters from Melbourne in Victoria were based in Perth, Western Australia, and were constantly travelling to Adelaide by steamer. Discuss in class the objective of this. Could this be the basis for a new TV action-romance-historical drama series? Working in small teams, put together a production proposal to a major TV network for the first series of episodes based on this exciting period of Australian communications history. Your final presentation may be in any suitable format: oral; desktop-published, printed promotional material; or as one or more web pages.
- You are the editor of an Adelaide newspaper. In 350-400 words write an editorial piece insisting that the South Australian colonial government do everything in its power to make its own colony the hub of news telecommunications across Australia and to the outside world, and how it may be funded. Give reasons in favour of this argument. (Remember that until 1901 there was no federal government in existence to raise taxes and to finance colonial building and construction.)

## JOHN MCDOWALL, STUART AND CHARLES TODD

We see from the program that Stuart and Todd had very different personalities, yet both were driven men, instrumental, in fact vital, in developing an important communications route across Australia that eventually reached out to the world.

- From what you have seen in the program and discovered from any further research, discuss in class what you consider to be the main differences and similarities in behaviour and temperament between Stuart and Todd.
- Imagine you are the grazier James Chambers, employing Stuart to explore the outlying regions of South Australia and beyond. In your own words as Chambers, as though giving a speech to a group of Adelaide politicians to gain support for further exploration of the interior, describe the qualities, knowledge and abilities Stuart has that make him a successful overland explorer in a very difficult and unforgiving environment, and why they should back him financially.

- Write a fair and balanced newspaper obituary of Stuart's life, summing up his achievements and failings. Include a headline, and from available sources add a captioned photograph or illustration portrait to the obituary. (You may first need to find out what an obituary is, and how it is structured; check newspapers for some examples.)
- The program speculates as to the events that may, at least partly, explain why Stuart came to Australia from Scotland in 1838. From these possible events create a fictional short story set around the middle decades of the 19th century. Present the story in any mode, style and genre you consider best. (You may wish to discuss possibilities for characters, character relationships, plot, settings and themes with the class first.)
- During his expeditions Stuart contracted the debilitating illnesses of scurvy and sandy blight. In pairs, create a poster display explaining what these sicknesses are, how they are contracted, how they may be medically controlled and prevented, and whether they are as prevalent today, in certain circumstances and regions of Australia, as in Stuart's day. You may illustrate the posters with diagrams and photographs where necessary.
- Discuss in class what you think historian Dr John Bailey means in the program when he says that Stuart could reclaim his 'self-respect' and 'redeem himself' in the outback. Discuss the range of possibilities for a short story about a person who finds personal redemption in the Australian outback, then write your own story on this topic and theme. An alternative may be to work in pairs to create an outline for a short film, and to provide a storyboard of simple drawings to illustrate the essential scenes, including captions for descriptions, possible dialogue and further information as required.
- Charles Todd's work and achievements extended beyond the construction of the overland telegraph. Research then write a 500-word biography detailing his other successes both before and after the overland telegraph was built. For instance, it is claimed that his meteorological investigations were a forerunner to our knowledge today of such weather patterns as El Nino. Find out whether this claim is justified. You may illustrate the biography with drawings and photographs.
- At one point the workers on the northern section of the telegraph downed tools because of poor conditions. In pairs, prepare a dramatic scene of dialogue about these problems and how to resolve them, taking place on location between at least one of the workers and Todd. With other students as required, either rehearse and carry out a play reading to the class, or record and edit the scene as a sound file for playback on a computer. For a recording you may wish to add sound effects, music and a voice-over narration.
- Discuss in class why Todd set up an 'Australian pony express' during the construction of the overland telegraph.
- Using desktop publishing software, compose and create a newspaper front page story about the final connection of Todd's telegraph line to the British Telegraph submarine cable in Darwin, October 1872. Include illustrations as required.
- When Todd returned to Adelaide after the telegraph line was built he was given a hero's welcome. Research this event, then write a set of private diary entries as though you were Todd, putting down in words your own feelings, thoughts and impressions about what you have experienced, and what you may owe to others, especially to the pioneering work carried out by the late Mr John McDouall Stuart, and the debt of gratitude you owe, perhaps, to your wife.
- Create a specially designed commemorative art poster or website page in memory of the achievements of two men who greatly influenced the course of modern Australian history.
- In pairs, carry out research on the living conditions and work of the people who ran and serviced the 'repeater stations' along the telegraph line's route. Create either a poster display on the subject or write an illustrated magazine article aimed at a young teenage audience.
- In pairs or small groups, create an 'alternative history' scenario, considering the following questions. What if Stuart had not reached the northern coast of Australia? How would this have affected Todd's vision to build a trans-continental telegraph? Would such a telegraph line ever have been built? When may it have been constructed, where, and by whom? What if the journey of Burke and Wills from Melbourne to the north coast had succeeded? Write your alternative history about the coming of the telegraph link to the outside world. Add maps and illustrations as required. You may wish to carry out this activity as one or more web pages for your school intranet.

#### INTER-COLONIAL RIVALRY

The events described in *A Wire Through the Heart* took place decades before Federation. Because of this, the news media, wealthy private landowners, businessmen and the politicians of each self-governing Australian colony felt the necessity to advance their own cause, otherwise they would be left behind in the rush to modernise and to make their mark upon the world. In this sense, rivalry among the colonies was intense and was often fed by attitudes and opinions expressed in the pages of the parochial, local newspapers. South Australians

looked on as Victorians, for example, benefited in many ways from the 1850s gold rushes of Ballarat and Bendigo, causing 'Marvellous Melbourne' suddenly to become Australia's leading city. In comparison, Adelaide was in danger of seeming a quiet backwater.

- We are informed that when it was realised there were two exploration parties simultaneously attempting to travel from south to north of the continent, the newspapers began to report it as an inter-colonial 'race' for glory between South Australia and Victoria, a race between John McDouall Stuart and a team led by Burke and Wills. Write two different newspaper editorials about this. The first should be by the editor of an Adelaide newspaper, the second by the editor of a Melbourne newspaper.
- Following from the previous activity, plan and write two major newspaper reports of the two events that took place on the same day: the first should be about the Adelaide public's celebratory welcome to Stuart on his successful journey back from the north coast, as presented in an Adelaide newspaper; the second should be about the burial of Burke and Wills, as reported in a Melbourne newspaper. You should attempt to refer to both events in each report, and to 'slant' the historical details towards the interests and feelings of the local readership.
- Discuss in class examples of where inter-colonial rivalry of the past continues today as interstate rivalry, and whether the news media today plays a role in fostering this rivalry. Does interstate rivalry of any kind serve a positive or beneficial purpose?

### COLONIALISM, INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS, THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The spirit of 19th century colonial adventure was not merely fuelled by a desire to know what was 'out there' in Australia's mysterious interior, but a quest to discover whether it was profitable and could be put to some practical use. As the program suggests, building an overland telegraph not only provided relatively instant contact with the 'home' country, England; it would also amass huge revenue and other commercial benefits for the colony controlling and owning the telegraph. Very little was allowed to interfere with this.

- From the program and from any further research, discuss in class and then write your own report about the colonial attitudes expressed in the South Australian parliament and by the newspapers towards the Aboriginal populations of the interior, after Stuart reported he had been attacked by a party of Waramungu warriors. Why do you think these attitudes were held and do you think that at the time they were understandable?



- In the program's press kit, Cyril Japaljarri Dixon, who plays a Waramungu warrior at Attack Creek, says that Stuart and his party had been travelling unannounced for months through tribal land, using up resources. Finally the Waramungu responded to what they saw as an insult. Discuss in class and explain what you think Dixon means by his statement.
- Following from the previous activities, plan and write a letter to the editor of a newspaper, published at the height of the South Australian parliament's debate on the issue, attempting to reassure and 're-educate' a fearful Adelaide population. As though you were Stuart himself, write another letter to the editor replying to the first one. (You are first advised to research Stuart's own journal entries in which he comments on the incident at Attack Creek.)
- In groups or as an entire class, research and prepare a presentation about the history of the Waramungu people from first contact with Europeans through to the present, showing the effect on them of European expansion into the country's interior. This may be done as a scripted oral documentary project which may be made up of different segments, such as 'mock' interviews, reports, extracts from historical sources, and the use of sound effects, European and Indigenous music, recorded and edited for radio (or for your school's intranet).
- Research and write the definition and purpose of an Environmental Impact Statement and a Feasibility Plan. Drawing on this information, discuss in class whether the undertaking to construct an overland telegraph (or any similar huge project) could be discussed and 'green-lighted' by parliament in only 24 hours and then proceed almost immediately in today's more regulated political, environmental and culturally sensitive climate. Write a report in 400-500 words on what would be required today before embarking on such a project. (You may first wish to examine the issues surrounding the recent completion of the Adelaide-Darwin railway line.)

## MEDIA STUDIES

After viewing the program, carry out the following activities:

- Discuss in class and write notes on the way in which the narrative is chronologically constructed. For example, although the narrative takes us back to the 1850s, why does it begin at the end, in 1872? Would it make a difference to audience perception and understanding to have proceeded in chronological order?
- Discuss or write a brief commentary on the validity, necessity and purpose of staged re-enactments and historical speculation, as contrasted to authentic and verified historical record, in the program. Examine, for example, the sequence of Stuart's desert delirium, where images of his past haunt him.
- Discuss in class then write a report of 200-250 words on the purpose and effectiveness of additional film elements in the program, such as soundtrack music and the use of animation, photographic and editing techniques. For example, you may ask whether contemporary, orchestrated music is an advantage over the use of 'typical' or authentic mid-19th century music in scene-setting and mood.
- Imagine you are the director of this program, Darcy Yuille. Prepare and write a set of diary entries (or production notes) about the issues, problems and logistics of putting together the 'shoot' in a range of difficult locations, and placing it all into a 19th century period setting.



## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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### Film/TV

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[www.connectingthecontinent.com](http://www.connectingthecontinent.com)

Samuel Morse and telegraphy:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse\\_code](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse_code)

Today's Adelaide-Darwin railway link:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Ghan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ghan)

Waramungu and other Indigenous Australian peoples:  
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[www.clc.org.au/media/publications/landalive/warumungu.asp](http://www.clc.org.au/media/publications/landalive/warumungu.asp)  
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### Constructing Australia: A Wire Through the Heart

A Film Australia Making History Production in association with Piper Films and the South Australian Film Corporation. Developed with the assistance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the BBC. Produced with the assistance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Narrator: Wendy Hughes  
Director: Darcy Yuille  
Producers: Mike Piper, Simon Nasht, Corey Piper  
Executive Producer: Alex West, Mark Hamlyn  
Duration: 55 minutes  
Year: 2007

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