Making tracks

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In the 1932 *Australian Motorist*, Althos Clothide stated that 'overlanding should be as much a national characteristic as the gumtree or the koala'.[1]

An ambitious idea, particularly when there were only the most basic mechanics in terms of roads, maps, cars and accommodation. Yet by 1939 over 1000 crossings of the Nullarbor Plain, between Adelaide and Perth, were being made annually. In the 1990s Peter Bishop likens overland travel in Australia to a Grand Tour. Indeed for some Australian overland travel has become part of a ritual journeying around their homeland.

What I want to focus on in this paper is how overland travel is retold, and particularly how the road can become a site and destination in itself. I will concentrate on The Eyre Highway, once known as the trans-continental track, which is the route leading across the Nullarbor Plain. This is a major artery within the network of roads criss-crossing Australia and one that has been essential to overland travel from its beginnings in the 1920s.

Narratives of overland travel, some popular travelogues, others articles appearing in motoring magazines reveal there are some recurring tropes employed when retelling the journey of the road. I want to focus briefly on three themes. Firstly there is the confrontation with space and distance, an inescapable element of travel in Australia. Secondly, an awareness of earlier pioneers and travellers whose track the modern day overlander is in part following. Finally there is a sense of community which develops when traversing Australia: the traveller feels a certain bond with both fellow travellers and those people who live along the route. Together these elements create a sense of the experience of the road. While the overlanding I consider is a form of leisure activity it is also a means of appreciating and appropriating the landscape of Australia which is at once familiar and foreign.

So, to the Eyre Highway. The fact that the route was initially referred to as the 'trans-continental track' emphasises the concentration on space and distance when touring in Australia. To travel from east to west is to be confronted with the vast enormity of what is the traveller's 'home'. Yet in this naming of the track there is focus on the beginning and end, a sense of continuous movement towards a destination. Another way of referring to the journey is as 'crossing the Nullarbor'. This focuses on the immediate enormity of the Nullarbor, the way the motorist is surrounded by openness. As Ion Idriess comments in his 1951 account driving across the Nullarbor is 'like being in an open boat. Only the sky, and distance and loneliness'.

It also usually entails a defence of the Nullarbor, with the author stating that there is much of interest, in the 'No Tree Plain'. Both these terms highlight the inescapability of distance when overlanding in Australia, but there is another reference, appearing in numerous later narratives which focuses on a specific stretch of the track. These are references to the 'ninety-mile straight'. Describing the ninety-mile straight achieves two things. It focuses on the road as a site in itself, and an experience to be had, but in

doing so also illuminates the space most dramatically. Another way in which the retelling of overland journeys focus on the distance covered is the use of images. Most accounts of overland travel include images, be they route maps or photographs, and they, as well as the narrative focus on the space. In the case of Frank Clune, Ion Idriess and Tim Bowden, three different methods are used. Clune includes a photograph of sign with distances, indicating a choice in destination but showing the isolation. Idriess places a superimposed map of Europe on the map of Australia, which both demonstrates the size of Australia, but also implies that Australia has as much to offer as the numerous European countries. Finally, Tim Bowden includes a photograph of a long straight road through uninviting landscape. Each of these is an attempt to deal in an interesting manner with space that would appear empty.[2]

While space and distance are probably the most confronting of the tropes when travelling in Australia, another theme which is employed in the retelling of the overland trip, is to make a link between the modern motorist and overlanders of the past. In the case of the crossing the Nullarbor the most obvious focus is on Edward John Eyre. Eyre's 1841 journey across the Nullarbor is commemorated in the official naming of the road, which was instituted after World War Two. What is interesting is that in a number of accounts of overland travel the link with Eyre is used as a tool for retelling the modern journey. Frank Clune in the 1950s and Tim Bowden in the 1990s both focus on the journey Eyre undertook, Bowden using it as a parallel journey to his own. They both acknowledge the absolute difference in the experience, Clune recognising he would be 'comfortably seated at the steering wheel of a mile-eating motor car'.

Despite the obvious differences there is still an attempt to link the two journeys. For these particular authors to travel the road is not enough; there must be an awareness of who has gone before. I would also argue there is an attempt to find something more elevated in the modern day, touristic experience, by foregrounding the hardships of the route. Bowden's fairly uneventful crossing, which focuses on the triviality and minutia of travel is interwoven with the experience of Eyre, to create a broader understanding of the particular route being followed. To follow the Eyre highway is to cross from east to west, but also to trace the journey of earlier overlanders, so the distance and the history are two elements that create a particular experience of the road.

A third element that goes into the retelling of the overland journey is the idea of community which develops on the road. There are two aspects to this equation. Firstly, other travellers met along the way, and secondly the people encountered who actually inhabit places along the course of the track. The idea of a travelling community has been a continuous one in the retelling of overland journeys. In the enormity of the landscape, coming across another motorist, both creates a link, but also emphasises the isolation. It has long been tradition to stop and exchange news, about the road and shared experience, though today with the desire for speed this ritual is perhaps limited to stopping places, such as Deralinya station which Bowden mentions in his account. As Stephen Muecke states, regarding the change in encounters when two cars cross paths: 'For a brief moment all stare and shout and wave and then the vehicles are separated and for each only the dusty road yawns ahead'. Time and distance are magnified through the encounter with anther of the community of travellers. Yet for all these overlanders there is the shared experience of

leaving the cities and travelling on the road, which is then retold in the narratives and forms a constant trope.

Another element to the theme of community is the momentary connection with people met who live along the way. The Eyre Highway again provides a pertinent example. In the early part of the century the majority of accounts regarding this track make reference to the Gurney family. This was a family who inhabited Eucla and manage Koonalda station. While their existing in such a space of isolation was a constant wonder to the generally city-bound motorist, the Gurneys provided a point of reference and also a space where overlanders could meet. Indeed they also played a part in ritualising the crossing of the Nullarbor by providing for the motorists an Overland Club Sticker. Indeed Idriess states when nearing home that 'none of the cars whizzing by would have dreamt the little machine was completing a 9000-mile trip, though curious eyes noted the Overland Badge stuck to the windscreen'.

In the later twentieth century it is the people who work in the isolated service stations who provide the human interest for overlanders in the landscape. Again there is the confrontation with how people live in a landscape so vastly different from that which the motorist calls home. Yet, the Nullarbor Plain is part of the continent which is Australia. So there is the question of what exactly the concept of home entails. By leaving their city abodes, the overlander is engaging with their preconceived images and perceptions of what 'the rest' of Australia is like. The crossing of the Nullarbor Plain provides a focus for this, a means to seek out the unknown Australia.

I do not wish to claim that each overland journey is the same. In the span of overland travel there are solo journeys, honeymoons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives. People can travel across, through, around or to a specific part of Australia. What is apparent however is that in the retelling of the overland journey for a broader audience there are particular themes which are employed to convey a sense of the trip. Within this experience the confrontation with Australia's enormity, the links made to earlier travellers and the sense of community are all part of the whole. To travel overland is to follow a road or track and in the accounts the road becomes a site and experience in its own right. The Eyre Highway is not only a means of traversing from east to west, it creates a particular experience for the motorist, and in doing so provides a focus for the retelling of the overland journey.

Endnote

[1] 'The Unsung song of the Overland', *Australian Motorist* July 1932