

Paroo tracks: water and stock routes in arid Australia

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Tis said the land out West is grand—
I do not care who says it,
It isn't even decent scrub,
Not yet an honest desert;
It's plagued with flies and broiling hot,
A curse is on it ever;
I really think that God forgot
The country round that river.

Henry Lawson: 'The Paroo River'

The Paroo is the archetypical ephemeral stream of western NSW and Queensland¹. While recognised as a major tributary of the Darling River, the Paroo in normal years never reaches the main river, being absorbed or evaporated in a series of braided streams and temporary lakes long before it can flow there. Yet even in the dry seasons its waterholes and swamps provide essential water for both native species and pastoral stock, and in wet seasons it covers large areas and is a formidable barrier to travel.

The country surrounding the Paroo and its eastern neighbour the Warrego River is otherwise devoid of surface water. The early stock routes perforce followed the chains of ponds and billabongs that marked the routes of the seldom-flowing Paroo and Warrego Rivers - following, also, the Aboriginal routes through the area. Early roads and later highways followed the stock routes, and telegraph lines followed both. Reliable stock movement and pastoral settlement away from the rivers was denied the early pastoralists, and only after the discovery of artesian water in 1878 could closer settlement become viable. Then followed an interesting cause and effect cycle in transport route planning. The stock routes became formalised in NSW from 1884 and got government-funded artesian bores, which entrenched these routes in the landscape. The roads followed the stock routes across the dry plains, just as they had along the rivers, because that is where the water was. And the modern highways largely follow those same routes.

As a result, the map of the roads through the Paroo is the historical documentation of the critical role water plays in determining where we go.

Exploration, survey and early European settlement

Charles Sturt explored the Macquarie, Barwon and Bogan River areas and travelled down the Darling River as far as the site of Bourke in 1829.² Thomas Mitchell reached the Darling on 25 May 1835, and at Eight Mile Lagoon, about 11 km south-west of the later Bourke township, built a log stockade, called Fort Bourke after

Governor Sir Richard Bourke, to protect his stores from possible Aboriginal attack. Mitchell then continued down the Darling River from Bourke to Wilcannia.³

Edmund Kennedy, Thomas Mitchell's second in command on his 1845-46 expedition that crossed the headwaters of the Warrego River, returned to the area exploring in 1847, and travelled down the Warrego to about 65 km below Cunnamulla before cutting across to the Darling near Bourke, roughly along the line of the subsequent stock route, road, and today's Mitchell Highway.

The Darling River country was first settled, with stock being moved along the river in the footsteps of Mitchell in the 1840s. The isolation of the area, and the impact of drought, limited the extent of settlement, which only started to expand in the 1850s and into the 1860s, as demand for cattle on the gold fields increased, and as river steamer transport got underway on this section of the Darling from 1859. A second wave of exploration and surveying took place in the early 1860s, the identification of routes with available water for stock movement being one of the primary objectives of the pastoralists and explorers. Through this process the primary routes for European movement were set in the landscape.

Property boundaries along the Paroo were surveyed by Surveyor Charles Arthur during 1861 and 1862. Arthur laid out five-mile frontages along the river, with the runs extending just five miles back into the dry country—beyond that pastoral settlement was not considered viable.⁴

Robert Biggart Gow travelled up the Paroo from Killara Station on the Darling in 1861, soon after Killara had been established for Dr Youl, Melbourne's City Coroner. Gow, John Thornton, a 24-year old Yorkshireman, and 'Captain', the Aboriginal man whose real name was Tiluletto, joined by the manager of Killara, travelled north-west through the Paroo catchment, meeting a party of surveyors under Surveyor Arthur in the channel country, and continuing north-west towards the Bulloo. Thornton and the manager returned to Killara, but Gow and Tiluletto continued, meeting up with pastoralist Vincent Dowling (who had taken up Fort Bourke Station in 1859) who was also exploring the border country for additional runs. It appeared that the country at least as far as the Bulloo to the north-west and possibly as far as Coopers Creek had already been checked out by tight-lipped pastoralists even before Burke and Wills got there.⁵

The role of Aborigines in guiding and otherwise assisting the early explorers, surveyors and pastoralists is more read between the lines than clearly stated. Gow had Tiluletto with him, and John Chadwick Moore, the first Crown Lands Commissioner for the Albert District covering the Warrego/Paroo/Bulloo country in 1863, retained Aboriginal names for features wherever they were known, implying he either had Aboriginal people advising him, or second-hand information from early pastoralists/explorers who had information from Aborigines. It seems certain that the river-based routes were traditional Aboriginal tracks, and it is likely that the few early routes across dry country linking scattered water sources such as waterholes and artesian springs were based on Aboriginal knowledge.

Pastoralism on the Paroo

The pastoral settlement along the well-watered Darling River gradually expanded in the 1850s and 60s. Movement into the area to the north and west, along the Paroo and Warrego Rivers, was constrained by scarcity of water. Movement of stock northwards up the Warrego River was dependent on the location of Aboriginal wells, water holes on the river, mud-springs and the sinking of ground tanks.⁶

The region experienced a mixture of genuine pastoral development and overt speculative land dealing. While the maps of surveyor Arthur show a close pattern of five-mile deep blocks along the Paroo and Warrego Rivers, the land beyond these 'water' frontages was divided into large, regular blocks, most of which had probably never seen any stock. While there was much speculative trading in these blocks, some genuine pastoralists were taking up and stocking land both sides of the border.

A good example is James Tyson, who in 1867 travelled to the Warrego and began acquiring land during an economic slump. He accumulated runs in an unbroken stretch from Wyandra, between Cunnamulla and Charleville, south to beyond the NSW border on the western side of the Warrego. His Tinnenburra station north of Barringun, and at the time the largest holding in Australia, was a vast stretch of land of approximately 3336 square miles created by amalgamating a number of runs originally taken up by Thomas Gordon Dangar in 1859, Joseph Cope Page in 1860, and others. James Tyson acquired these runs from 1868, and eventually 68 runs were amalgamated into Tinnenburra.⁷ Tyson ran cattle on his runs until the 1890s, when access to artesian water from nine bores enabled him to run sheep.⁸ The huge Tinnenburra shearing shed was completed in 1896, with 101 stands, said to be the largest in the world.⁹ When Tyson died in 1898, unmarried, he left an estimated £5 million. He is immortalised in the Banjo Patterson poem 'T.Y.S.O.N.'.

Other well-known stations of the late nineteenth century included Myer and Bonney's Momba station, north of Wilcannia. By 1867 good track with roadside ground tanks led from Momba north-west to Yancannia, and beyond.¹⁰

The large Currawinya station, just north of Hungerford on the Paroo, was taken up by James and Alexander Hood and James Torrance in 1866, though they appear to have operated at the station from 1861. The property amalgamated a number of smaller, named runs. After a series of ownership changes, it was transferred to Sidney Kidman for a short period after 1916.¹¹

The formal break up of these large pioneering stations commenced in 1884 in Queensland, with the passing of the *Crown Lands Act*. This Act aimed at enabling persons with little capital to have access to grazing land. By the late 1890s there were over 100 selections in the Cunnamulla district, with 36 blocks being excised from Tinnenburra alone.¹² The advent of artesian bores further encouraged sub-division, as it was seen that smaller areas became viable with the newly available access to water. Artesian water also had an impact on the nature of pastoralism— in the early period of pastoral development cattle were preferred to sheep, as they could graze further from water supplies and travel greater distances without watering. Sheep took greater prominence after the artesian bores enable much larger areas of land to be supplied with water.

A even larger-scale break-up of the big properties came with the soldier settlement schemes after the first and second world wars. As an example of the process, Thurrulgoonia station, in the Warrego catchment in Queensland, which was originally 567,000 hectares, was progressively subdivided into 56 leases of 1000 to 20,000 hectares.¹³

Artesian water, stock routes and roads

Now the stock have started dying, for the Lord has sent a drought;
But we're sick of prayers and Providence—we're going to do
without;
With the derricks up above us and the solid earth below,
We are waiting at the lever for the word to let her go.
 Sinking down, deeper down,
 Oh, we'll sink it deeper down:
As the drill is plugging downward at a thousand feet of level,
If the Lord won't send us water, oh, we'll get it from the devil;
Yes, we'll get it from the devil deeper down.

A.B. (Banjo) Patterson, 'Song of the Artesian Water'

As already described, the settlement and grazing of much of the country in the Paroo was initially limited to areas where surface water was available, while the back country of the region was not extensively settled until the presence of artesian bore water was discovered. The first tapping of water from the Great Artesian Basin was made at Kallara station near Tilpa in 1878, where a shallow bore was drilled at a natural artesian mud spring near the Darling River. This was followed up by a deeper bore at Goonery Springs, north-west of Bourke in 1884.¹⁴ In the same year the NSW government commenced sinking bores along the Bourke to Wanaaring road, under the new *Public Watering Places Act*, to provide water along roads and stock routes, greatly contributing to the opening up of the Paroo and Warrego country to grazing.¹⁵ Some routes, such as the Wanaaring to Milparinka track, which had been impassable for stock were able to be made into stock routes only by the creation of bores at Public Watering Places. Many other routes that had only been able to be used during good seasons when ground water was available and ground tanks full, became year-round stock routes with the sinking of bores.

Artesian bore sinking also commenced in Queensland. In 1886 a deep artesian bore was put down at Thurrulgoonia station south of Cunnamulla¹⁶, and James Tyson sank a bore on Tinnenburra Sstation at Kungie Lake, believed to have been sunk with the object of filling the ephemeral lake permanently. While producing a good flow for stock purposes, it was insufficient for the larger plan.¹⁷ Four artesian bores produced good flows on Dunlop station near Louth in 1889.¹⁸

The impact of artesian and sub-artesian bores on the pastoral industry was dramatic. They allowed extensive watering of previously non-viable land, and lead to the change in balance between cattle and sheep grazing. As an example of the scale of

the change, Thurrulgoonia station today has 2,195 km of bore drains from 207 bores and 700 earth tanks.¹⁹

The linkage between the tracks of the explorers and surveyors, stock movement, roads and artesian bores is an interesting one. The present pattern of movement through the Paroo and Warrego landscape was determined in the 1880s and 90s by those linkages. The dual foci of transportation and stock routes were, and remain, Bourke and Wilcannia, on the Darling River.

The Darling River was for many decades the highway into north-west NSW and south-west Queensland. Captain Cadell's steamer *Albury* reached as far up river as Mount Murchison station east of the site of the future Wilcannia in 1859, and the paddle steamer *Gemini* (Capt. William Randell) reached the Bourke site in the same year.²⁰ Bourke became a major river port, and the town became a major transshipment centre for the wool trade. Bourke was effectively the head of the river for most steamers, but the coming of the railway to Bourke in 1885 impacted on the river trade there, changing the town from an up-river port to a centre for the movement of wool to the railhead.

Wilcannia became Australia's third largest inland port. During 1887 alone 222 steamers took on 26,550 tonnes of wool and other goods at Wilcannia wharves. Louth also became an important shipping point on the river, especially for copper from Cobar, and Tilpa also acted as a port. The river trade declined with the drought years after 1900, and the trade ceased entirely when the rail bypassed Wilcannia, and motor vehicles began providing effective links to rail-heads in the 1920s.

North of the border, the two main towns were Charleville and Cunnumulla, both established as official settlements on the Warrego River in 1868.

As indicated above, the pastoral activities feeding the river ports spread initially northward up the Paroo and Warrego Rivers from the Darling, and southward from central Queensland through Charleville. This settlement soon demanded communications services, with private postal service running up the Paroo from 1865, and post offices being established in Barrington, Enngonia and Hungerford (Hoodsville) between 1866 and 1870. These were serviced by horse-back or coach along rough tracks running beside the rivers. Postal services were extended to Eulo and Thargomindah in the early 1870s. Telegraph lines later followed these established routes.

Horse coaches remained a mainstay of the transportation system on the Paroo until well into this century. Morrisey's coaches operated up the Paroo from Wilcannia to at least as far as Hungerford in the 1870s.²¹ Wilcannia in the 1870s also became a coaching centre for prospectors exploiting the regions gold, copper silver and opal resources. Roads led to, among other places, the Mount Browne gold field near Milparinka, and the White Cliffs opal field.

In 1886 Cobb & Co started up in Charleville, and moved its coach manufacturing operation there from Bathurst in 1893, retreating before the spread of the coaches arch-rival, the railways. The factory finally closed down in 1920, as the motor vehicle took over.²² Coach-building also took place in Bourke.

In many cases stock routes and horse and coach routes predated the surveying of the roads. The first surveyed road north from Bourke was in 1872, when a road and stock route was laid out from near Bourke north to the Warrego, then along the river to the border at Barrington and on to Cunnamulla and Charleville. This followed the earlier horse route, which had been in operation since at least the mid-1860s, and coaches were operating from Bourke as far as Barrington in 1878. The route was improved at the southern end in 1883, when it was realigned to start at the new bridge over the Darling at North Bourke.²³ A series of Public Watering Places and bores were established along the route from 1884, and the road was gazetted as the Mitchell Highway in 1936. In Queensland the road and stock route extended from Barrington north to Cunnamulla and Charleville, and a branch road ran from Cunnamulla through Eulo to Thargomindah.

Another major route went north-west from Bourke via Ford's Bridge and Yantabulla to Hungerford. This had been a stock route with ground tanks and artesian springs from the mid-1870s, before being gazetted as a Travelling Stock Route (TSR) in 1884, at which date Public Watering Places were created under the new Act, and artesian bores were sunk on these reserves over the following years. The Hungerford to Bourke route became, after the provision of Public Watering Places, a link in a major long-distance stock route which extended from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Murray River.²⁴ A surveyed road followed the northern edge of the TSR, along a route that had been a coaching track for a decade. This road was the one taken by Henry Lawson in 1892-93, when he walked from Bourke to Hungerford and return in the height of summer. The track was followed by many shearers and unemployed men seeking work, and the bores, tanks and springs were critical to their survival. A number of Lawson's poems and stories describe the conditions on the track.²⁵ When bicycles became common in the mid-1890s, travel along the track became much less arduous for bush workers. The Bourke to Hungerford road was classified as a main road in 1923, even before that north to Barrington.

The route from Wilcannia north to Wanaaring and up the Paroo to Hungerford, was one of the earliest European routes through the region. A private postal service ran up the Paroo from 1865, and by the turn of the century there was a series of bores and Public Watering Places along the route, and roads ran from Hungerford on to both Eulo and Thargomindah. The current road from Wilcannia to Wanaaring follows this earlier route in part, but is diverted west out of the Paroo flood plain country in the middle sections.

The route from Bourke west to Wanaaring was established as a stock route in the late 1870s, and gazetted as a TSR in 1884. Government bores and Public Watering Places were created along the track, which was extended as a stock route westward to Milparinka with the use of bores. The route was a coach road by the 1890s, and was declared a main road in 1928. Wanaaring village started life as a watering point for teams travelling the Paroo in the 1870s.

A major stock route, the Malpus Track, ran from Wanaaring through Louth to Cobar, to service the copper mines there.²⁶ This is one of the few major stock routes not to have become a modern main road. Stock routes also ran along each side of the

Darling River between Bourke and Wilcannia, and onwards to Victoria from the 1870s, again now paralleled by the modern road system.

Conclusion

It can be seen from this brief overview of just one region that the historical and modern routes through the arid pastoral districts of Australia were dependent on the availability of water. The extensive system of travelling stock routes in western Queensland and New South Wales was made feasible by the discovery of the Great Artesian basin, and the sinking of hundreds of government-funded bores to tap it.

The complex relationship between stock movement, the artificial provision of water, and the development of the transport routes and settlement patterns, still found in these regions, deserves more study than it has as yet received.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper is based on work originally carried out for the Australian Heritage Commission (Pearson, Pullar & Thorp 1999), expanded by later research.

² Sturt 1833.

³ Feeken & Feeken 1970.

⁴ 'The earliest survey and settlement of the Paroo', *History of Bourke*, Vol 13: 221.

⁵ Gow MSS; Shaw 1987: 21.

⁶ Cameron, W.J. 'State highway No. 7 north of Bourke', *History of Bourke*, vol 4: 144-145.

⁷ 'Land Settlement across the Queensland Border' *History of Bourke*, vol 12: 93-94; Blake 1979: 21.

⁸ Blake 1979: 21.

⁹ 'Big sheds and big tallys', *History of Bourke*, Vol 10: 122.

¹⁰ George Watt to Edward Henty, 19/10/1867, Henty Papers, Latrobe Library, Melbourne, quoted in Shaw 1987: 41.

¹¹ *Hungerford Centenary Magazine*, 1975.

¹² Blake 1979: 26.

¹³ Cameron and Blick 1991: 76.

¹⁴ Shaw 1987: 79; Walsh 1993: 152; Aplin, Foster and McKernan, 1987: 224; *Australian Encyclopaedia* 1: 269.

¹⁵ Walsh 1993: 149-157; Shaw 1987: 79.

¹⁶ Walsh 1993: 143; Blake 1979: 8; 'Artesian Water', Warrego and South West Queensland Historical Society, Vol 1, 1970.

¹⁷ 'Artesian Water', Warrego and South West Queensland Historical Society, Vol 1, 1970.

¹⁸ Shaw 1987: 79.

¹⁹ Cameron and Blick 1991: 76.

²⁰ Painter 1987.

²¹ *Hungerford Centenary Magazine*, 1975.

²² *Centenary of Charleville*.

²³ Cameron, W.J. 'State highway No. 7 north of Bourke', *History of Bourke*, vol 4: 145.

²⁴ McKnight 1977: 40.

²⁵ Burrows & Barton 1996.

²⁶ 'The Malpus Track-1890s', *History of Bourke*, Vol 3: 75.