One hundred years of the CANNING STOCK ROUTE

by Ken Leighton

It is 100 years since the Canning Stock Route was first surveyed by Alfred Wernam Canning. This 2000-kilometre track that crosses four deserts is a journey through remote, breathtaking country: the breakaways, springs, giant saltpans, mysterious rocky outcrops and endless dunes that have made the 'Australian outback' legendary to the rest of the world.

1959
The last cattle drive leaves Billiluna at the northern end of the stock route

1963
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1977
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2002
Access rights for Canning Stock Route travellers preserved by a native title ruling

2007–10
Centenary of Canning Stock Route celebrations

In 1906, the State Government, under pressure from Kimberley pastoralists, agreed to investigate the viability of establishing a stock route to bring live cattle to southern markets. David Carnegie had explored the area further east in 1897 but suggested the scheme was "absolutely impracticable". However, a decade later, Alfred Wernam Canning proved him wrong. He found a viable route that has since become known as one of the world's premier four-wheel drive adventures.

A problem and its solution

The Kimberley cattle industry had its beginnings in the 1880s, following marathon overland droving trips from the New South Wales and Queensland cattle areas. The expanding gold mining industry in Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie lay more than 2000 kilometres to the south. The hungry miners provided a ready meat market but the Kimberley cattle were being increasingly affected by ticks and were quarantined from being transported south. The cattlemen reasoned that a 2000-kilometre, well-watered stock route through the centre of the State—and the change of climate along the way—would see the ticks drop off and the cattle arrive in good condition.

Hence, in 1906, an expedition led by Canning set out to survey an inland stock route to the Kalgoorlie Goldfields. Canning, an accomplished surveyor with the Department of Lands and Surveys, had just finished the epic construction of the 1850-kilometre No. 1 Rabbit Proof Fence. With his able deputy Hubert Trotman, Canning spent months preparing for the trip. They amassed an enormous quantity of gear and stores for two years. All had to be transported by camels. They hired well builders, cameleers and general hands and, by May 1906, were ready to leave Day Dawn near Cue with eight men, 23 camels, two horses and the cook's new dog. Ahead of them was the unknown: about 2000 kilometres of sometimes thick bush, spiny spinifex, some 900 soft sand dunes often up to 15 metres high, blazing hot days, freezing nights, scurvy from an inadequate diet and a cantankerous and vindictive cook.

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Main Durba Hills shine red in the sun along a stretch of the Canning Stock Route.
Photo – David Bettini
Insets
Early expeditions along the Canning Stock Route.
Photos – Courtesy of Landgate

Above Red sand dunes adorn the arid inland of the Canning Stock Route.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left Camel tracks in Lake Disappointment in the Little Sandy Desert.
Photo – Marie Lochman

Canning knew that locating a suitable stock route would depend on the ready availability of water. The water had to be potable, at a reasonable depth and at intervals not exceeding a fair day's droving distance (about 25 kilometres). To this end he enlisted local Aboriginal people to act as guides. Often, his wells were sunk alongside or on an Aboriginal waterhole. Canning reasoned that if the Aboriginal well was replaced there was less likelihood of vandalism or pollution by the locals. In 1906, there was little or no Aboriginal cultural awareness. Canning would have been unaware that he himself was committing cultural vandalism and that the consequences would be exacted on some unfortunate future travellers along the route.

Parts of the central Western Australian desert had previously been crossed by a series of dedicated explorers. In his quest for a stock route, Canning crossed the routes of Warburton (1873), John Forrest (1874), Ernest Giles (1876), Laurence Wells of the Calvert Expedition (1896) and David Carnegie (1897). Collectively, they identified key topographic features such as Joanna Springs, Weld Springs, Calvert Ranges, Breaden Hills and Sturt Creek. Canning used this scant knowledge to guide him through the deserts but none had travelled extensively along his prospective route. Canning's own intuition and skills as a surveyor and bushman got the route through, together with a lot of help from local Aboriginal people.

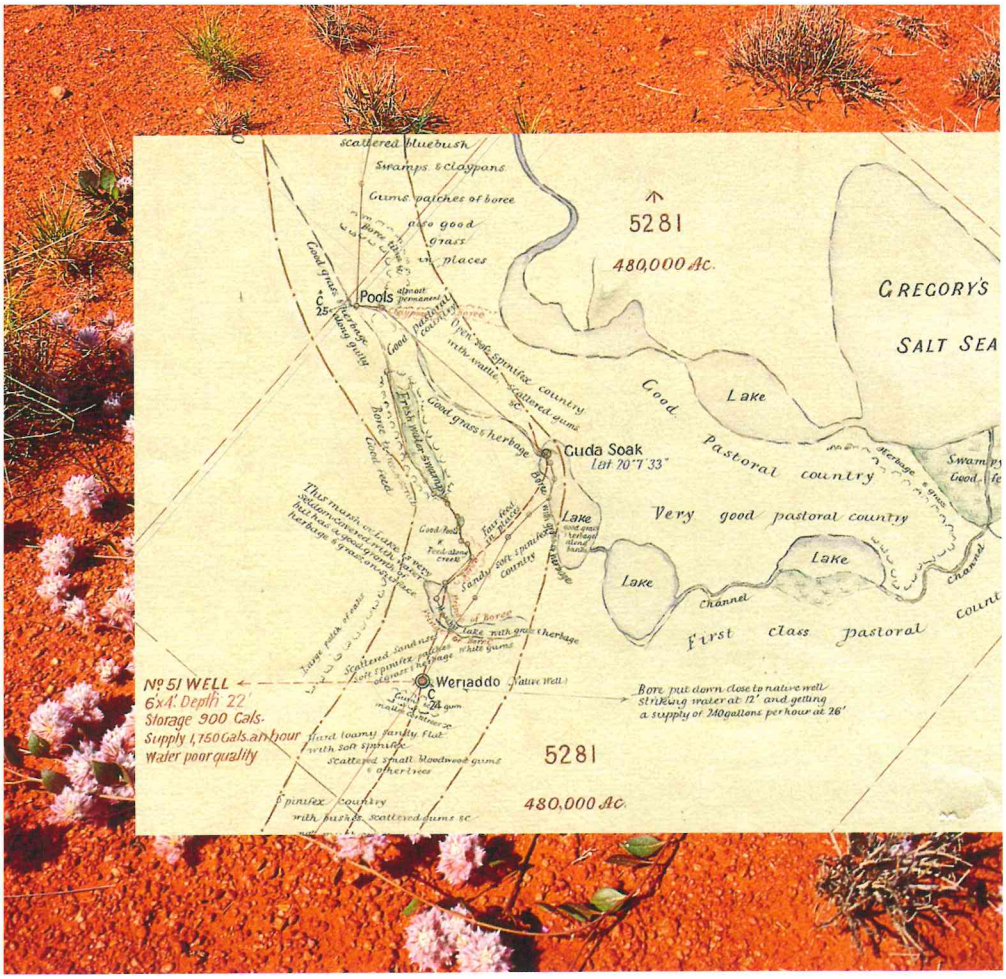
It took five months, about 100 years ago, for Canning and his team to traverse the harsh wilderness of central WA to the Kimberley. After spending Christmas in a rough bush camp in the far north of WA and having sat out the northern summer and replenished their supplies, the team left the Kimberley to retrace its route to Wiluna in February 1907. On this trip they located more wells and test bored potential sites. Two months on, at No. 40 Well, a skirmish between a local Aboriginal man and Michael Tobin, who was employed with his brother as a well sinker, saw both men die in what an investigation deemed was more likely a misunderstanding than a malicious act. These were the first recorded deaths on the Canning Stock Route, but would not be the last.

Boring wells

Canning's enthusiastic report to the State Government was widely acclaimed, especially by the Kimberley cattlemen. So by March 1908 Canning had again recruited a team of hardy souls to embark on the construction of a series of 52 permanent wells. This was to be a two-year project, again of epic proportions. Canning used 70 camels and four wagons to transport 100 tonnes of food and equipment, and 267 goats were herded for meat and milk. The construction team consisted of 30 men, who operated in three groups. The first preceded the others and bored for water, which was then 'on tap' for the second and third teams, which leap-frogged each other and sunk the well around the bore casing.

Above Remains of No. 10 Well.
Photo – Ken Leighton

It was a very efficient operation and the teams averaged one well every 15 days on the northward journey.



Above left Part of Canning's six-metre-long detailed survey map, prepared in 1907. *Photo – Courtesy of Landgate*

Above Lake Disappointment from the air. *Photo – Jiri Lochman*

Each well was equipped with 13 metres of galvanised trough, a whip pole, pulley, a hand-operated windlass on supporting legs and two 45-litre buckets. All this had to be carried by camel for the entire route—there would be no resupply mission. The wells were timbered from trees found locally, the most common and durable being the stately desert oak (*Allocasuarina decaisneana*). By April 1910 Canning and his team were back in Wiluna, having completed this extraordinary task.

Droving days

The first commercial drover on the Canning Stock Route appears to be George McIntyre in October 1910. He took 42 horses from Pine Creek in the Northern Territory to Coorow in WA. Only nine survived. Next, in December 1910, William Mayberry drove 77 head of horses south, and 13 died along the way. In January 1911, Shoesmith, Thomson, Chinaman and maybe three other Aboriginal stockmen left Halls Creek with a mob of 150 bullocks. From Thomson's diary entries it appears that on or about 26 April they were murdered at No. 37 Well. Cole and Pennefather discovered the bodies on 29 June 1911 while droving a substantial mob of 350 bullocks south.

Despite these difficulties, the concept behind the route worked. The ticks indeed dropped off and died along the way, the cattle flourished, calves were born and all generally arrived in better shape than when they left the Kimberley.

The immediate decline in use of the route has been attributed to fear of attack from Aboriginal people. By the mid-1920s, the wells had become so badly deteriorated—as a result of fire, termites and vandalism—that it was imprudent to drive cattle along the route. In 1929, the State Government contracted a reconstruction team, led by William Snell of Leonora, to refurbish the wells. Snell sank three new wells (3a, 4a, 4b) and erected six windmills and tanks, becoming the first person to make limited use of a motor vehicle along the stock route. However, he failed to complete the refurbishment. In 1930 the State Government asked Canning (now aged 70) to complete the job. For 16 months Canning and his crew systematically resurrected the wells, including most of those previously attended to by Snell. Canning rarely agreed with Snell over the siting of wells and resolutely resited those that Snell had shifted. Between 1911 and 1931 only eight mobs of cattle had used the stock route.

With the advent of World War II and the bombing of Wyndham Harbour—the port by which most cattle were now being shipped south—the then Public Works Department commissioned further renovation of the wells. By 1944, however, Wyndham Harbour had reopened and the more efficient southern shipping trade resumed. Again the Canning Stock Route languished. In the period 1932 to 1959 only 20 mobs completed the journey. The last cattle drive left Billiluna at the northern end of the stock route in 1959.

Route reborn

By this time the Canning Stock Route lay neglected, destined to become a fading dotted red line on maps and at risk of becoming lost forever. The route had served only 30 cattle drives. All that energy and the lost lives hardly seemed worth the effort! Then, in 1963, a survey party took five weeks to travel the length of the route by four-wheel drive. The Canning Stock Route was reborn. By 1977, the first commercial operator was taking wide-eyed tourists along a track on which only cattle and horses and few men had trodden before. More vehicles than cattle have now travelled the length of the Canning Stock Route. It has become an international icon of adventure, but not all have come in four-wheel drives. Beach buggies, a Citroen 2CV, the ill-fated Murray Rankin trolley, motorcycles, camels, walkers, joggers and a helicopter have all conquered the challenge—where the journey itself is the main attraction rather than any destination.

One hundred years ago Canning faced challenges presented by the terrain and carrying enough supplies to sustain him and his party. Today, even in the comfort of a four-wheel drive, the corrugations along the track pose a serious test for any vehicle but the sand dunes are not so formidable for the new breed of four-wheel drive. Information to help prepare for the journey is readily available through the internet and good publications. Thorough preparedness is the key to safely enjoying the serenity and history of the desert environment.

The track offers extremes in scenic diversity. The pastoral country in the south and the ancient salt-lake systems blend into the rugged Durba Hills and the hidden treasures and unlikely permanent waters of Durba and Killagurra springs. Just north, the sand dunes start and the vegetation changes dramatically. After summer rains the spinifex plains produce an abundance of wildflowers and majestic desert oaks provide picturesque campsites. At dawn and dusk, nature seems to be at its most intense. The colours are more dramatic and the wildlife more inquisitive. At any time you would be unlucky not to have a close encounter with the camels, dingoes, kangaroos, emus, bustards, parrots and a great diversity of reptiles that inhabit the route. Contrary to its name, Lake Disappointment will not disappoint. This enormous, usually dry, lake has unique shimmering salt crystal formations and is so hostile in terms of surface roughness and its ability to draw moisture from tissue because it can get so hot, that insects and small animals often die trying to cross it. Often their skeletal remains are preserved by the salt. Its sheer size and purity commands respect. It should not be driven on as it is significant to the traditional Aboriginal owners and its unique ecosystem can be damaged easily.

It is probably unavoidable that access to the Canning Stock Route will need to be more rigorously controlled in order to protect its natural and cultural values. Few tourist icons left in the world have no active management to promote a sustainable future. Just as Canning would not have envisaged the transition from cattle to cars, it is difficult to predict what might be in store for the route in years to come. The cost of fuel will make some reconsider the journey, and the corrugations are a test of man and metal. However, few who have completed the journey would not consider themselves privileged.

Left Euros are a common sight on the Canning Stock Route.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Below Durba Spring provides a scenic setting along the route.
Photo – David Bettini

Above Salt flats on Lake Disappointment.
Photo – David Bettini

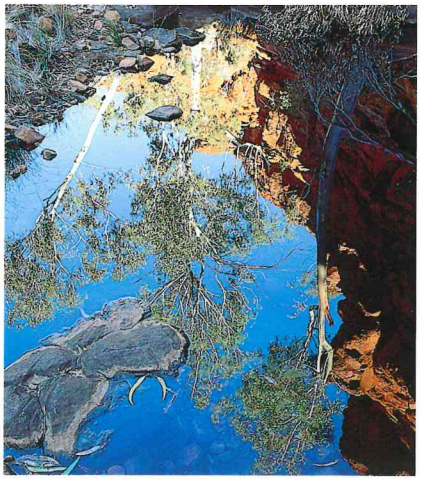
Right The Canning Stock Route now serves as an exciting tourist attraction.
Photo – Ken Leighton

Centenary celebrations

It has been 100 years since Canning and his team set out into the unknown. Can the culture and heritage of the Canning Stock Route be preserved for the next 100 years? To celebrate its centenary a program of events has been compiled by Landgate (formerly the Department of Lands and Surveys and Canning's employer). A number of State and local government agencies, TrackCare, private industry, Aboriginal interest groups and research and tourism groups have been invited to take part in the program of events through to 2010. The public will be invited to become involved through a number of Department of Environment and Conservation *LANDSCOPE* Expeditions over the ensuing years. For more information on the *LANDSCOPE* Expeditions visit www.naturebase.net.

The program of celebration will be divided into four streams: *science*, incorporating the *LANDSCOPE* Expeditions and geographic studies; *history and heritage*, to audit, register and help preserve heritage assets, record oral histories and produce various publications; *art and culture*, to facilitate access and participation in community events; and *tourism*, to develop tourism strategies through education programs involving local Indigenous communities. The centenary initiative is still in its early stages and events have yet to be properly scheduled. However, it has become apparent that sustainable management of the Canning Stock Route into the future will involve local Aboriginal communities with strong ties to the area (see box).

There has never been a time in the Canning Stock Route's history that didn't present a challenge to those who sought to travel along it. The centenary project is not a publicity campaign to get more people on the track. The route doesn't need more people. It needs more informed people, better management and a mindset change for the outback tourist. This is already beginning, with more responsible attitudes to removing rubbish and leaving campsites in better condition than they were found. Encouraging travellers to show temperance in lighting up the traditional romantic campfire is a challenge that has a way to go, but the biggest cultural change will be acceptance of and respect for native title and all that it entails.



Above Trees reflect from the waters of Durba Springs.

Below right Camels are common along the route.
Photos – Jiri Lochman

Access rights for those wishing to travel along the Canning Stock Route were preserved in the native title determination by Justice French in 2002. However, the native title claimants have what amounts to common law title over areas along the route. For some time, traditional owners have been concerned about uncontrolled access to their significant sites and about them being photographed, published, and, in extreme instances, vandalised. Although the Aboriginal heritage along the route is of interest to tourists and an integral part of the cultural narrative, until such time as access permissions can be negotiated, the traditional owners have requested that people respect their heritage and refrain from visiting significant sites. Further information on access restrictions to significant areas can be obtained from the Ngaanyatjarra Council in Perth (phone 1800 189 936).

The Canning Stock Route's rich history—starting with Canning's epic journeys of discovery and well construction, and embracing the tough Kimberley cattlemen and drovers, the Aboriginal stories and, much later, its morphing into a tourist attraction—has ensured the dotted red line on the map will last well into the future. The centenary projects over the next four years will help to preserve the many unique qualities of the route for the next generation of adventurers.

The Old Bullock Road – Warntarri Purlumanupurru

The Canning Stock Route, or Warntarri Purlumanupurru, crosses the traditional lands of the Walmajarri and Wangkajunga people to the north of the Percival Lakes and the Martuwanga people to the south to Wiluna. These were the nomadic Aboriginal people who Canning used to guide him through the deserts. Collectively they form part of a wider Western Desert community who long ago left the desert lifestyle behind, ironically travelling along the stock route to settle in established communities like Fitzroy Crossing, Billiluna, Mulan or Jigalong, Punmu and Kunawarritji (No. 33 Well) and Parnngurr (Cotton Creek) to the south.

These Aboriginal people had never seen a white man or clothes before nor a horse or camel. These were alien things in their lands that disrupted their solitude. And they wanted the most precious of their resources, their water. It is little wonder that the Aboriginal people in these areas were often aggressive to approaches by the explorers.

After a rapport had been struck, however, Aboriginal people would accompany the exploration team and show them where to find water. Some were probably coerced into the role but others stayed on voluntarily with their wives after they finished acting as guides and continued to draw on the rations they received. Canning was adamant that without the help of the local Aboriginal people he couldn't have completed his task and issued them with team medals when they left. However, despite a Royal Commission investigating the claim of a disgruntled cook exonerating Canning of ill treatment, many Aboriginal people were not well treated 100 years ago.

After the completion of the Canning Stock Route and the 52 wells, the guaranteed supply of water about every 25 kilometres meant Aboriginal people could more readily move about the deserts. The water also attracted wildlife, making it easier to gather food.

Today the senior men and women who were born (to parents who would have known Canning's survey and construction teams) and raised in this area never knew their land without the drovers and other transient non-Aboriginal people, or without the introduced camels and the feral cats and foxes that displaced so many of the native species. They had to adapt to European culture and accommodate neighbouring linguistic groups who were displaced from their hunting grounds by Europeans.

Their traditional ties with country were recognised by Justice French in his determination of the Martu Native Title claim over the mid-section of the Canning Stock Route. Significant sites along the route remain important to Aboriginal culture. As part of the centenary celebration programs proposed over the next four years, organisations such as the Australian Institute of Torres Strait Islander Studies intend to rigorously document the traditional culture and art. The Alice Springs-based Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre has also instigated a program to seek opportunities for desert communities to take advantage of the burgeoning tourist market, such as active participation in desert guide programs and co-management arrangements for the Canning Stock Route.

It is hoped that such programs will benefit Aboriginal communities and all who wish to experience the unique qualities of the Australian outback.

For more information on the celebration of the centenary of the Canning Stock Route contact Ken Leighton, Project Manager, Geographic Services Branch, Landgate, PO Box 2222 Midland 6936, phone (08) 9273 7130 or email ken.leighton@landgate.wa.gov.au.

Department of
Environment and Conservation

Executive Editor: Kaye Verboon. Editor: Rhianna King. Designer: Grant Fuller

Above
Ranji bush (*Acacia pyrifolia*).
Photo – Ken Leighton

1897
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First commercial drove on Canning Stock Route

1911
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Wells deteriorate from fire, termites and vandalism

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