

Story about Balfour Downs Station

Meg found this document, that was written by visitor to Balfour Downs when Meg, John and the boys lived there. Meg could not recall the name of the author, and the first pages of the story are missing. We included this to provide an outsider's perspective in Balfour Downs and station life at the time. The story commences where the author and his mate appear to be making their way to the station.

It's work, but it's good honest work. Essential work. And, when you escape the bog, satisfying work.

We did a good job. Chud backed out of the bog, over our path of trees and stones, onto the centre of the road.

Resuming our journey to Balfour Downs, Chud drove more slowly and kept strictly to the centre of the road. We reached, and safely crossed, Jiggalong Creek at midday.

The creek flowed clear over a sandy bed. We bathed, washed out our muddy clothes and put on clean ones before eating our lunch. Without breaking into the good clobber, we wanted to appear respectable, or at the very least, presentable, on our arrival at Balfour Downs homestead.

Ten miles beyond Jiggalong Creek we bogged again.

"Aw, come on Chud. Once is funny," I said.

As it was not the first time, we reacted more calmly. I found plenty of stones within carrying distance, so this bog did not delay us more than half an hour. It did, however, transform our appearance into something less than presentable.

We could not expect to reach Balfour without bogging again. We decided not to risk another set of clean clothes.

John, of Balfour Downs, greeted us warmly. He shook our muddy hands and did not comment on our mud-splattered appearance. Indeed, he would have been surprised had we arrived otherwise.

John was six-foot tall, clean shaven but with a bristling Henry Lawson-like moustache. He spoke, slowly, of bogs, bad roads and past and future rains. We did not stay long. The fuel dump was uppermost in our minds. We could not fully relax while the drum of petrol was in the vehicle. It was like a lodestone around our necks.

John told us that some geologists, in two Land-Rovers, had passed through the day before. They were heading for a point beyond the Canning stock-route. On the strength of this information, Chud and I assumed the road to be in a reasonable condition.

We assumed wrong.

Only seven miles west of Balfour the front wheels of our Land-Rover went down in a sticky mess created by the vehicles before us. We worked hard for half an hour and succeeded in getting the back wheels into the same bog. Once again another innocent stand of mulga was sacrificed to provide a base that enabled our vehicle to escape to firm ground.

Beyond the Balfour Downs home paddocks, the watercourses were fewer. We camped at twilight and, with only one other bog during the afternoon, our spirits were high. It would have been a perfect desert camp but for the black clouds streaming across from the west, blocking out the stars and threatening rain.

I felt happy with the days work. In the face of difficulty we had made good progress into the desert. I have received a day's wages on several occasions for doing no more than bogging a vehicle early in the morning and spending the rest of the day extricating it. On

those days I always considered I have earned my pay. Regrettably, my supervising surveyors have not shared my opinion.

Chud was also basking in the comfort that comes with the knowledge that one has worked well and made progress. He wanted to talk about it. His statement displayed fully his tendency to remark on the obvious.

"A bloke'd be buggered out here without a shovel and an axe."

Early next morning we crossed the headwaters of the Oakover River and passed through the rabbit-proof fence at mile post 672.

This fence was a significant point. At last we were getting somewhere. The rabbit-proof fence survey was a Canning survey. Canning, the man whose stock-route we aimed to drive. At the fence we crossed Canning's trail.

Alfred Wernham Canning's father worked a farm in Victoria. Alfred was born in 1860 and he qualified to practise as a surveyor in New South Wales. He worked for the Lands Department in Bega, Cooma and Bathurst before going to the West in 1893. He soon proved himself a capable surveyor working in the country between Albany and Eucla.

Western Australia was expecting other, more numerous, visitors from the east in the 1890's - rabbits.

In 1859 an unthinking Victorian imported rabbits into Australia. The rabbits, being rabbits, went forth and multiplied - and spread. The Perth government of the day decided to make an effort to keep the rabbits out of their farmlands. Canning began the survey of a line for a rabbit-proof fence. At Starvation Harbour, between Albany and Esperance on the Great Australian Eight, he headed north into the interior of the state.

The survey reached a point near Southern Cross. Such was the government's respect for the mobility of the rabbit population, Canning was asked to extend the survey line further north, into the Wiluna district, then on to include the Filbara region, carrying on to the Indian Ocean at Cape Karaudren, north of the mouth of the De Grey River.

During 1902 Canning, Trotman and a camel man, Hasan, explored the northern section in order to find a practicable route for the fence to follow. There were many factors to be considered. The fence had to be positioned east of the settled areas of Western Australia and west of the oncoming rabbits.

Naturally, the availability of water - surface and underground - was of paramount importance. The search for water occupied most of Canning's time. On some sections all the men were forced to wash in the same pint of water. The route needed to pass close to any forest areas capable of providing the timber required in the construction of the fence. As well as these restrictions Canning had to avoid rugged country that would make the building of the fence difficult and expensive.

One of the Canning party's supply points was Balfour Downs. Here the men enjoyed the spartan comforts offered by the pioneer homestead. Then, as now, Balfour Downs was the last station before the desert.

Travelling a line between the desert and the Oakover River, Canning pushed north. When he reached the vicinity of the Oakover-De Grey River junction many months had elapsed since he had last reported his progress to his superiors in Perth. He also needed to order extra supplies. Canning sent Trotman and Hasan to the river junction to wait, while he set off on camel for Wallal, the nearest telegraph office.

Canning had covered only 40 of the hundred-odd miles to Wallal when his camel died. He walked on. His unerring sense of direction brought him to the telegraph line less than a quarter of a mile from his target.

Unassumingly, Canning entered the office and lodged his report for sending to Perth, along with his request for supplies. The telegraph operator informed Canning that the government had expressed concern for the safety of his party. Canning could not understand why. They were only overdue.

With his business at Wallal completed, Canning calmly turned again to the desert for the walk back to the river junction. The telegraph operator apparently showed some amazement at Canning's intention to return to his men cross-country. He suggested that Canning follow the coast road south to the De Grey River and then follow that river inland to its junction with the Oakover and his waiting men. A longer, but safer route. Canning declined. He would return the way he had come.

While the Wallal man expressed surprise at this decision, he is reported to have said Canning's aura of confidence convinced him that Canning was quite capable of completing any journey he chose to undertake.

With the fence route reconnoitred, Canning returned to Wiluna district to begin a survey to locate it. Encumbered with a surveying assignment and the extra personnel required to carry out this task, Canning now had a new source of problems while battling the same hostile environment. When the survey finished at Cape Karaudren, the length of surveyed fence line, from its starting point on the Great Australian Bight, totalled 1175 miles. Canning also carried out 1200 miles of traversing to connect his fence line to existing surveys in the developed areas of Western Australia.

The construction of the fence was completed in 1906. Arguments still persist on how effectively it checked the spread of the rabbits west.

For many years the government employed men to patrol and maintain the fence. Theirs was a lonely job. They kept the fence clear of spinifex growth, ensured that the gates remained closed and repaired all breaks. They fought a losing battle.

The fence became the butt of many jokes. It prevented the rabbits from returning east. The rabbits queued at the gates waiting for the patrolman to come and let them through. If he was late the rabbits built their own styles over the fence.

(Photo)

The rabbits won. Kangaroos and emus, floods and fires continually damaged the fence - sometimes beyond repair. The patrols ceased. Nature had triumphed over man.

Maybe the fence significantly delayed the rabbits' advance in some areas. Maybe it didn't. But the fence, or its remains, survive. Many pastoralists maintain sections of it for their own use. In the north, the fence was a landmark and in the early part of the 20th century landmarks of this kind, in the north, were rare. I've no doubt many prospectors, drovers and explorers used the fence, and the track beside it, as a lifeline in the lonely country. Even Chud and myself, more than sixty years after its construction, positively identified our position on the map, when we passed through the rabbit-proof fence at the 672 mile post.

I ordered Chud to pose for a photo.

Pleasantly buoyant at the contact with Canning, the real purpose of our trip, Chud and I discussed the prospect of delivering the drum of fuel at Well 22 that evening. Then we saw two Land-Rovers heading down the track towards us. Chud pulled over onto a dry spot. We got out of our vehicle and stood beside it. The geologists stopped their vehicles in the centre of the track, one behind the other, and ambled up to us - one man from the front vehicle and two from the other.

"You won't get far," the leader told us. "It's still too wet. We've been getting stuck all the time. You get out of one bog then you get into the next. It's unreal out there."

"How far did you get?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Forty or fifty miles maybe. We were in one bog for seven hours. You'd be mad to go on in that over-loaded old thing."

He contemptuously nodded his head in the direction of our Land-Rover. Overloaded? Sure, and now very dirty as well but, none-the-less, our Land-Rover. I didn't like this bloke. I gained the impression that his two workmates didn't like him either. They remained about ten feet behind and did not attempt to support or contradict their leader at any stage. Strange.

"Why don't you come back with us?" the talkative one suggested. "We'll help you over the bad spots."

"Er ... not yet," I said.

"No," said Chud. "We'll push on for a few miles and see what it's like."

"Okay, whatever you reckon." Then, realising we were going on, he suddenly softened his line. "Of course, you may do better. It's probably dried out a lot since we were there."

The two silent men smiled. The leader stood awkwardly in front of us, not wanting the conversation to end but unable to prolong it.

"Well ... we'll be seein' yuh," I said and moved towards our Land-Rover.

The leader responded, suddenly in a hurry. "Yes, right. See yuh." He walked quickly to his vehicle and drove off. The other two followed.

"There's something funny going on there," I said to Chud. "I think those guys were playing no-talkies with each other." Chud agreed.

Whatever their troubles, the geologists served us well. We now had fresh tracks to guide us. Chud and I used their experience to our advantage. Where they had bogged in the track we detoured around. Where they had bogged on detours, we stayed on the track

or added detours to their detours. In this manner we successfully negotiated several of the so-called horror stretches. Shortly after lunch we arrived at their seven-hour bog.

Seven hours was no exaggeration. Over one hundred feet of track, along with a few attempted detours, had been transformed into a soggy, filthy mess. Chud and I made an inspection.

The other party had stopped here overnight. We looked around their camp. Chud found a bunch of spinach and an apple. I found a jacking block and, strangest of all, two shovel blades in the camp fire ashes. Only the blades. It appeared that the handles had been burnt out of them.

"What's going on here?" I stared at the ash-covered blades.

"They've been used to boil the billy," declared Chud.

"Yes. I wonder what the hell was going on with those guys. Maybe the boss wanted to go on and the other jacked up on him and burned the shovels."

"Surely not," said Chud.

"Why else would they burn the shovels?"

Chud's only answer was to shake his head.

We had two good reasons to get beyond this bog. To achieve our purpose of heading east and to succeed in our "overloaded old thing" where the others had failed.

We conducted an extensive reconnaissance of the area surrounding the seven-hour bog and worked out a detour. We walked the length of our detour several times. I dug my heels into the earth as hard as I could. It is possible to locate soft ground by this method but sometimes the heel of the boot merely indents the crust of earth over a treacherous bog. The weight of a vehicle has no trouble breaking through the crust.

Our Land-Rover sank slightly a couple of times as Chud drove it around the seven-hour bog. On each occasion he carefully backed out and detoured further. The detour extended and became more of a by-pass. We eventually regained the track with the seven-hour terror now behind us.

We pressed on. But not for long.

No longer did we have the wheel tracks of the geologists' vehicles to guide us.

To the eye the road presented a clear, unbroken surface. But, at any moment, we knew the surface could crumble beneath us. Unlike the road between Ethel Creek and Balfour, there had been no consolidation of the surface by generations of traffic. It was beyond the station country. Beyond the reach of most tourists.

It led to a place with the unflattering name of Windy Corner. At Windy Corner the track intersected a similar one which, in turn, joined others of the same description. These tracks are all part of the network established by Len Beadell in the late 50's and early 60's.

According to Beadell, the first track, the Gunbarrel Highway, was constructed to allow a geodetic survey to connect the Overland Telegraph Line to the surveyed areas in Western Australia. This road, and the others that followed, enabled Native Welfare personnel to make contact with groups of aborigines living in the Great Sandy Desert. Many people believe the roads were constructed to provide access to any rockets which may have faltered and crashed in the area after their launching from Woomera.

Beadell's roads provided the first basic network through this extensive area of desert. They are still used today. However, the infrequent but often heavy desert rains have converted many to watercourses and today most travellers find it easier to drive beside the track than actually on it.

But most travellers do not venture into these areas in wet weather. Chud and I had no choice. Our fuel supply at Well 22 was essential. We had to continue east - even though the road was deteriorating.

We established a routine. I walked in front of the Land-Rover where the ground looked fragile. Progress was slow. We had a couple of narrow escapes. It was nerve-racking work.

We made camp early and discussed our position.

If we proceeded east our chances of becoming irretrievably bogged were good. What then? A wait until the ground dried out or a walk back to Balfour Downs for help. Help? We could not expect John to waste his time and risk his vehicle for the sake of a couple of tourists.

We decided to stay where we were for a few days and wait for the ground to dry out. We still had plenty of time. We could spare two or three, maybe even four, days. In that time the country would dry out and make travelling less hazardous and less nerve-recking than it was at present.

Once the decision was made I relaxed. The prospect of a few days, isolated here in the desert, appealed to me. A long weekend in the middle of nowhere. The sky was cloudless. Yet again, I thought the rain was over. A few days of sunshine and making the fuel dump at Well 22 would be easy.

Knowing I could sleep in the next morning, I read late into the night. A little book called "A Hero of Our Own Time" by a Russian named Lermontov.

Although I enjoy reading books of travel and history when at home, once I am on the move myself, I like to read the classics. I never leave home without a supply of books. I get the titles from high school and university reading lists.

The appeal of travel and history books is primarily one of locality. The classic writers concentrate more on human reaction to locality and other humans. A more universal topic. In the classics I often find a precept set down long ago, on the other side of the world, by a person alien to myself, which strikes a chord with me, here and now - in Australia today. It's uncanny. I guess that is the hall mark of a classic.

What had I, in the Australian desert in 1968, in common with a Russian soldier in the Caucasus more than one hundred years ago?

Lermontov wrote, "... when we get right away from the conventions of society and close to nature we involuntarily become children once more. The soul sheds all that it has artificially acquired, to be what it was in its prime and probably will be again some day."

And I knew exactly what he meant.

I finished reading and turned off the light. With Chud snoring softly in his swag I felt quite alone. The cool, invigorating desert air, the majestic grandeur of the desert sky, the moonlight transforming the spinifex to spikes of silver. The wonder of it all caught my breath. My throat. My heart. My spirit. Not only the beauty of nature and the power of the universe, but the wonder of the written word and how it can bring all men together.

Now I was too excited to sleep. I turned the light back on and tried to write a letter to Stan. My thoughts were ecstatic with the emotion of life. Too ecstatic, too sublime, too intoxicating to translate into words on paper. I dropped the pen and returned to Lermontov. He understood.

"Anyone who, like myself, has wandered among the wild mountains, has feasted his eyes on their fantastic shapes, has eagerly inhaled the vivifying atmosphere of lofty passes - will readily understand why I long to reproduce these magical impressions."

Ah, how I long to reproduce these magical impressions.

Despite the late night, I woke early. I could hear a strange noise. A kind of guttural, gurgling sound. Chud was also awake and listening.

"What d'you reckon it is?" I asked.

"Buggered if I know. Camel maybe?"

Camel! I was excited. Although many wild camels roam free in the desert, I had never actually seen one. Both this year and last I had seen many tracks, some only a few hours old, but the elusive beasts had always managed to keep out of sight. Here was my chance to see one.

I signalled to Chud to be quiet and stay in his swag and I stealthily slipped out of my own. I took the binoculars from my port and peered around the back of the Land-Rover. There was no sign of a camel. Yet I could still hear the noise. I climbed onto the roof of the vehicle and looked further. Nothing. Not a movement anywhere. The spinifex and scrub was nowhere more than waist high. How could I miss a camel?

I raised the binoculars and began a systematic search of the area. I focussed on a distance about two hundred yards out and carefully moved the field of view through horizontal arcs of 90 degrees. As each sweep was closer than the last I slightly adjusted the focus, after each sweep. If a camel was there, I would see it. Yes. There it was.

I distinguished the curve of a graceful neck, off-white in colour, moving between the clumps of spinifex.

"Yes Chud. It's a camel. A white one. Must be an albino. Yes, it's a beaut Chud, a beaut."

"You sure? An albino?" queried Chud.

"Yes, it's a beaut ... hold it ... I've lost it."

I looked above the binoculars. No more than a stone's throw away, my movements and exclamations had attracted the attention of a turkey (plain turkey or bustard). The bird immediately ran a few steps and then struggled ungainly into smooth flight. Chud, now leaning on his elbow in his swag, watched the bird disappear behind some trees. It was large but not at all camel-like. Chud began to laugh.

"It's a beaut. It's a beaut," he mimicked.

So to our day of rest in the desert. Chud rotated the wheels on the Land-Rover. I made him a cup of tea and continued reading my book. After lunch we walked forward along the track to see how it was drying out. After one dangerous section the track entered an area of sandridges and looked much safer.

We retraced our steps to the dangerous section and marked out some detours. Would you believe it, in the west, clouds were building up. Chud and I glared at them. By four o'clock they covered half the sky.

We dawdled back to the seven-hour bog to check if the geologist had left anything else we could use. There was no food there but, back at the Land-Rover, the turkey had returned. This time I saw it first. Chud got his rifle from the cabin of the Land-Rover, fired one good shot and we had fresh meat for tea.

Chud roasted the turkey in the camp oven. The bird was big and old. No doubt it had survived some poor seasons in the desert. Nevertheless, it tasted good. Not palatable by city standards perhaps, but even a Methuselah among turkeys tastes better than tinned meat.

As we each chewed a drumstick, Chud said, "You know, these things are protected. We could be fined for eating this bird. Keep your eyes open in case a cop comes along."

I was not afraid to speak with my mouth full.

"No. It's not the eating that's against the law. It's the shooting. I'm in the clear. You're the lawbreaker."

We enjoyed the meal but not the night. The cloud cover increased to completely cover the sky. I cursed the heavens and bedded down. I slept poorly. Each time I stirred, I looked for stars. I found very few. Worse still, I felt rain on my face. Light rain, but rain. How could the country dry out?

In the morning the sky was overcast. There was no rain on the horizon and the air was cool. We soon decided to give away the waiting game and continue our journey east. The carefully judged decision to wait arrived at after sober thought only one day ago, was quickly abandoned in the face of a few raindrops.

Chud said, "Let's go on. It's just as likely to get wetter as drier."

The detours we planned the previous day were good solid ones. We entered the sandridge country and made good progress. We came to the western edge of the McKay Range. The range is south of the track but numerous streams flow out of it and across the track. The crossings were risky. We bogged then pushed our way through two and rushed over another three. How long would our luck last?

I estimated our position 30 miles short of Well 22.

"Close enough," I suggested to Chud. "Let's leave the drum here. It's close enough to the stock-route. What d'you reckon?"

Chud rested his forehead on the steering wheel. He loves driving but the pressure of this trip was getting to him. He offered no argument. We rolled the obnoxious drum of petrol out of the Land-Rover and hid it among some saplings - Fuel Dump No. 1 was established.

We repacked the gear, with the tucker-box back inside. The vehicle's load was a good deal lighter. We felt unburdened, carefree.

As we had made it this far out in an overloaded vehicle, we assumed the return trip - with a lighter load and our outward tracks to guide us - would be easy. Unlike most of our assumptions, this one proved to be correct. We drove around the seven-hour bog at dusk. The sky was clear. A cool breeze blew from central Australia - the true winter pattern of desert weather. However, I no longer dared hope the rain was over.

While Balfour Downs was the eastern-most occupied homestead in this area, there was another, Talawana, on this track. Talawana is abandoned. Abandoned to a far greater degree than Talga. With time to spare, we drove down a side road to check it out.

The country was in good condition. Parakeelya pastures flourished. Sadly, no stock were present to take advantage of the good feed. We came to the old homestead. An abandoned homestead on the edge of the desert is a melancholy place. I looked around for souvenirs and found only pathetic evidence of human occupation.

I picked up a wheel from an old Singer sewing machine - the pedal model. I found assorted pieces of metal, a decaying tea-chest containing the disintegrated remains of a golliwog. A rusty tank had collapsed into a rotting tankstand. An old meat-safe lay beside it. The frayed canvas of a deck chair flapped feebly by the front door. Rank weeds were consuming it all.

The traces of human activity forced me to think of the people who had lived here. Who worked here. Who probably struggled here. Who may have been happy here. Who held hopes of improving the place. Of making a home. Of making a fortune, maybe. All come to scraps of trivia disappearing into the lush growth of a good season.

What happened? What caused the people to leave? Were the seasons bad? Did a creditor foreclose? Did the desert break a marriage? Was the call of the city or town too strong? Here was a story but no person to tell it. Too poignant to contemplate.

The toilet, a short distance from the house, had no walls. The seat cover was also missing. The throne, exposed but defiant, remained. Chud likes funny photographs.

"Here," I said. "I'll sit on it and go red in the face. Take a picture of me. You can call it 'Relief at Talawana'."

"Yes. Good idea," said Chud.

Balfour Downs homestead offered superior plumbing facilities. A bath. Most pioneer homesteads settle for a shower, but John and Meg allowed themselves the luxury of a bath. On our way through, they had invited us to overnight on our way back and take advantage of their ablution block.

In true swagman tradition, Chud and I drove up to Balfour late in the afternoon - in time for the evening meal. We were not the only callers. A dogger and his wife were drinking tea with John and Meg when we arrived.

"Oo, I'm cranky," said Meg. "Months go by and we never see anyone and now, for this night, we have four visitors."

The six of us crowded around the wooden table in the small kitchen. John's shy sons, Neddles and Bimbles, of pre-school age, clung to their parents in the presence of strangers.

"What did you two guys say to those geologists?" John asked.

"Nothing much," said Chud. "They were on their way back when we saw them. We just asked them about the track. Why?"

"Well, they asked me if you were government men checking up on them. Making sure they were not prospecting outside their lease. You had them really worried."

I looked at Chud in disbelief.

"We asked them how far out they'd gone. But only to get an idea of how far we could get," I said.

I told John about the burnt out shovels and my suspicion that all was not well in their camp.

"I don't think they were speaking to each other when they passed through here," said John.

"Anyhow," said Chud, "we enjoyed the spinach and an apple they left behind. I didn't expect to find fresh fruit and vegetables out there."

"Yes, and we had fresh meat too. My mate here shot a turkey," I added.

The Dogger, Amos, then spoke.

"You mean an emu, not a turkey."

He looked serious.

"No," I insisted, "a turkey. Plain turkey or bustard. That's their proper name."

"I know their proper name. But what your friend shot was an emu," said Amos.

I looked to the dogger's wife for an explanation. She smiled at me, blandly. Then looked at her husband.

"Right, so it was an emu that you shot," Amos repeated.

"No ..." I was about to start again, when John raised his hand.

"My friend," he said to me. "Amos is not only a dogger. He is also a game warden in this region. One of a game warden's duties is to take action against persons who destroy protected wildlife."

"Oh," I said. "Er ... oh."

Chud came to my rescue. "Wait on, it wasn't an emu or a turkey. It was an albino camel."

Amos laughed. "An albino camel! That's a good one. I haven't heard it called that before. An albino camel, eh?"

I, happily, allowed the matter to drop.

Amos and his wife were camped a few miles down the road; They refused Meg's offer to stay for tea. Meg insisted but they were adamant. I felt awkward. It was obvious that the dogger and his wife did not want to stay because Chud and I were there. Two extras were enough. No doubt Meg would have preferred some female conversation to that which Chud and I had to offer.

Actually John did most of the talking. He showed us over his workshop. His tools, his prized possessions, were individually wrapped in oil rags. He outlined the history of the mining industry in Western Australia: from Paddy Hannan to Tom Price. He knew every person that Chud and I had met in the north-west, along with an anecdote and observation on each.

After tea Chud and I washed the dishes. Meg retired to write letters - we would post them for her the next day. John continued to speak with an account of his involvement in the pastoral industry. I asked how long Talawana had been abandoned. An hour later I knew the entire history of the Talawana lease.

However, the story I liked most was the one John told concerning his courtship of Meg. Of all the many things he had done and seen in his life, I could see that this was the part

he treasured most. The events of the story were interesting, but it was the sensitive manner in which he told the story and the unashamedly tender way he spoke of his wife that appealed to me. I have long forgotten the events of the story and yet the manner of telling I still remember quite clearly.

My bathwater was cold when I finally reached it. I slept well and woke with the young children looking at me, lying in the swag.

"Hullo Neddles. Hullo Bimbles," I said.

They raised their fingers to their mouths and ran off.

We thanked John and Meg for the hospitality and entertainment we had enjoyed and left Balfour Downs.