



## Great Wall of Rabbit Repulsion

Ian Warden tells the story of the Number One Rabbit Proof Fence and describes some of the men who helped to build and maintain it

When it was completed almost exactly one hundred years ago (on September 30, 1907), Western Australia's Number One Rabbit Proof Fence became not only the longest fence in the world but also, surely, the loneliest workplace on earth.

For the men who had to patrol and mend the fence, usually with only camels for company, the solitude (in the immensity of the landscape) and the silence were extraordinary and eerie.

In 1949, former patrolman Arthur Upfield remembered the years between 1928 and 1931, when he patrolled, alone, 200 miles of the Number One Fence:

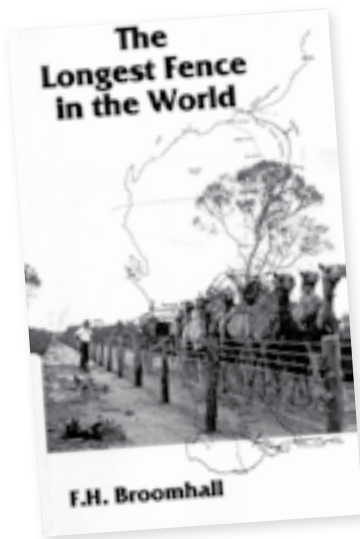
In summer the wind dies down for weeks together, and it is so silent by day and by night that often the patrol man will ring a camel bell or beat a tin just to relieve what appears to be the pressure on his ear-drums.

Commenced in 1901 and finished in 1907, the startling 1139-mile fence was built in quite a hurry (by the standards of those times) in the hope of keeping an enormous western swathe of Western Australian farming land free of the spreading 'grey blanket' of rabbits that had already so ravaged eastern and southern Australia. It stretched unbroken from Starvation Boat Harbour on the state's south coast to a place near Cape Keraudren on the north-west coast. It cost by one estimation 300 000 pounds, all raised by the state government from the scant revenues provided by a population, when the fence was begun, of just 109 000 souls.

The idea of the great, impregnable fence may seem a little absurd and naïve now (the rabbits were to prove almost an irresistible force everywhere in Australia) but there was surely something grand, admirable, and optimistic in the desperate determination of its conception, surveying and making. In his untutored but effective way, the fence's (amateur) historian Harry Broomhall—himself for a while, like Upfield, a lonely patrolman along a vast stretch of the fence—somehow manages in his *The Longest Fence in the World* (1991) to make

above left:  
Frank H. Broomhall  
*The Long Road, No. 1 Rabbit Proof Fence, Western Australia, 1926*  
b&w negative; 9.8 x 12.5 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3647494

above right:  
Layfayette Studios  
*Portrait of Arthur Upfield 1930*  
gelatin silver photograph  
14.6 x 9.4 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an9897467-1



above:  
Cover of *The Longest Fence in the World: A History of the No. 1 Rabbit Proof Fence from its Beginning until Recent Times* by F.H. Broomhall (Carlisle, WA: Hesperian Press, 1991)  
Courtesy Hesperian Press

below:  
Unknown artist  
*It's the Climate*  
reproduced from *Melbourne Punch*, 21 August 1884  
(East Melbourne: Melbourne Punch, 1855–1900)

the unlovely and workmanlike line of wire and posts sound like a living thing.

Broomhall (the National Library has his fascinating papers) loved the fence and believed the men who had conceived, surveyed, built and then patrolled and maintained it were unsung heroes. It appalled Broomhall that scholarly histories of the state ignored the feat of the out-of-sight-out-of-mind fence altogether. Had the same amounts of imagination, effort and expense gone into building something grand and visible (a terrific bridge perhaps, and in Perth where people could see it), everyone would

have sung its praises and dignitaries would have attended an extravagant opening ceremony. And so Broomhall himself, though no scholar, wrote a fond history of the fence.

Why was this longest fence in the world thought necessary? Why did Australia have a rabbit plague, albeit one that Western Australia had been relatively insulated against by the bleak, rabbit-unfriendly Nullarbor Plain? Although a few rabbits had come with the First Fleet, the true, plague-facilitating villain is generally agreed to be Thomas Austin—a kind of colonial squire of Barwon Park near Geelong in Victoria. In 1859, he introduced 24 rabbits to his estate

so that he and his distinguished guests would have something to hunt and kill. They all ran wild, spreading uncontrollably far beyond the estate that had been their springboard. In the first eight months of 1887, some ten million rabbits were destroyed in the colony of New South Wales alone. Factories for the processing and freezing of rabbit meat and for the harvesting of rabbit skins sprang up. Busy rabbiters bustled to these factories with their rabbit-laden carts.

Eastern and southern Australia teemed with rabbits. In March 1893, the *Australasian Pastoralists Review* published a bitter cartoon—'The King is dead; long live the King'—in which the late king, a Merino sheep, lay dead in the foreground while behind it there was the new king, a regal rabbit, sitting on a throne, wearing a crown and carrying a sceptre, and surrounded by adoring bunny subjects. 'King Bunny For Ever!', rejoiced one placard; 'We Hold The Land!', proclaimed another. And by the time Western Australia's need for a man-made fortification against them was thought of and erected, there were already rabbits in the west.

Although rabbits do not form themselves into invading armies, Upfield repeated the story, perhaps apocryphal, of how the Western Australian Government was given

a sense of fence-building urgency when, one day late in the 19th century, 'a man rode into Coolgardie shouting that the rabbits were coming westwards "in millions" and that behind them followed the dingoes'. A few nights later, the story, as told by Upfield, had the hitherto lush and gorgeous lawns at Coolgardie's racecourse nibbled to nothingness by the arriving invaders.

Rather condensing and simplifying what *really* happened, Upfield thought that:

The State Government acted with commendable promptitude ... It rushed men and materials by rail





left:  
Unknown photographer  
*Motor Lorry Loaded with 1760 Pairs of Rabbits, Drawn from Depot 30 Miles from Nearest Railway Station* c.1918  
albumen photograph  
15.1 x 20.4 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an24664485

below:  
Unknown photographer  
*Surveyor Canning and Party on the Survey Trip to Mark Out the Line of the Rabbit-proof Fence, Western Australia, c.1901*  
sepia-toned photograph  
15.2 x 20.6 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3997481

to Burracoppin, about 170 miles ahead of the advancing rabbits, and constructed the fence which is known as the longest netted fence in the world. From Burracoppin the fence was taken southward to the Southern Ocean and northward to the Pacific.

Broomhall sings the praises of Alfred Canning, the man who surveyed the fence line ('a tall slim man with a face burnt brown by the sun ... a most meticulous and accurate man with a marvellous sense of direction ... they used to say he was made of whalebone and sinews'), and of the fence's supervisor of construction Richard Anketell whose attention to detail was so scrupulous that he even had plants with a potential to poison the indispensable but gastronomically incautious working camels eradicated for at least half a mile on either side of the fence's site line.

The country in which Canning and then Anketell and his workmen toiled was remote and often forbidding. Upfield remembered a huge patch of 'desert' that began about 65 miles north of Burracoppin, and which was so distressing that 'even the crows won't stay inside this eighty mile desert, for they would most certainly starve to death'. Sometimes crows would cross this awful landscape with him to glean his dinner and breakfast scraps but always, he thought, hurrying to catch up and remain with him

'as though fearful of being left behind' in so grim a place.

Was the Number One Fence a success? Opinions differ. It was succeeded by shorter Number Two and Number Three Fences (they were sometimes joined to the Number One Fence and, by the late 1940s, Western Australia had 2050 miles of vermin-resisting netted fences) as though in retreat from the initial grand ideal of one, great, vermin-thwarting, coast-to-coast fence. Then, too, the Great War of 1914–1918 took away so many men (to what they imagined was going to be more congenial work and for an alluring six bob a day) that it became hard to keep the fence always in good repair.



As the century progressed, some parts of the fence were abandoned by Western Australian governments, although some stretches of it, increasingly more important for repelling wild dogs and crop-trampling emus, were maintained and are maintained to this day.

But the idealised dream of a fence that would keep the rabbits utterly at bay never came true. They, the rabbits, were unstoppable and scampered through gaps and even through open gates. Upfield growled in 1949:

A vermin fence is not a vermin fence when someone leaves a gate open all night, no matter if the fence is one mile or a thousand miles in length ... Despite notices attached to gates requesting travellers to shut them, despite prosecutions for failing to shut the gates there has always been that minority [that] ... persisted in not closing the gates. I have more than once arrived at a gate left open, and have seen the ground massed with the tracks of emus and rabbits passing through the gateway from the virgin country into the settled country.

In his book, Broomhall, in love with and loyal to the fence, rhapsodised about its effectiveness, but then he was not really an objective commentator. He worked so hard in 1926 and 1927 (usually alone save for the camels he admired so much, including his

'tall ... imposing' favourite called 'William the Conqueror') to make his stretch of it pristinely impregnable that, while we can trust his painstakingly gathered facts, his opinions may be suspect. Broomhall wrote with transparent fondness about the fence and the work of patrolling and looking after it.

He did most of his patrolling between depots at Burracoppin and Dromedary Hills using a kind of dray pulled by camels and in *The Longest Fence in the World*, he remembered his camels and his sometimes godforsaken workplace along the fence line with great affection.

Without camels it is unlikely the Number One Fence would have been built ... At first they are queer, awkward, slow, hard to understand, stupid, smelly, unapproachable and unfriendly, noisy, with awful groans at loading time, generally repulsive and trying to the nerves of anyone in a hurry.

... But then the thermometer begins to pass 100 day after day, then the feed disappears and only dry brambles can be found and finally, when water and the possibility of water become nothing but a wild hope, then the camel comes into his own. There he kneels, uncomplaining and unconcerned, a tower of strength and comfort, living on the fat of his hump and good for another 200 miles.

... Tracking the camels in the early morning I found some of the country I travelled through ... desolate in the extreme—hungry country—but once the mulga was reached there was colour—rich red soil, the mulga itself, carrara and bowgada bush and in the spring miles of pink, yellow and white everlasting, a carpet of colour for the whole earth.

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Unknown photographer  
*Portrait of F.H. Broomhall with  
His Camel-drawn Wagon,  
Dromedary Hills, Western  
Australia, 1926*  
b&w photograph  
16.4 x 21.9 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3997507

