

PAGES OF ADVENTURE

Baiba Berzins writes about the changing experiences of tourists to outback Australia as described by travel writers of the 1930s to the 1960s

Nowadays, travellers to the Northern Territory have the *Lonely Planet* or similar guides, as well as numerous Internet sites, to supply them with information about what to expect in this fascinating part of Australia. For much of the twentieth century, however, travellers who had the money and the yen to venture to the Top End had to rely largely on what they could glean from those who had gone before them.

Richard Sampson, a West Australian Member of Parliament, decided in 1933 to carry out a long-harboured ambition to travel from Adelaide to Darwin. It was a desire inspired by the first north-south motor car crossing of the continent by Henry Hampden Dutton (father of author Geoffrey Dutton) and Murray Auger in 1908. Their historic journey was documented in *Across Australia by Motor* (1909). Sampson considered it 'significant of the general lack of knowledge of the route that enquiries in the usual channels failed to discover definite information', but he was able to find out enough to convince him that the trip was feasible.

Twenty-five years after Dutton and Auger's epic journey much had changed.



By then, *The Ghan* had reached Alice Springs and the *North Australia Railway* stretched south to Birdum. Previously, there had only been 'the Track', a very rough road which followed the Overland Telegraph Line. It was along this route that Sampson travelled on the mail truck with the legendary Sam Irvine, a character well-known for his involvement in the communities of the Centre. There were mechanical breakdowns, 300 creeks and watercourses to cross and the nightly accommodation was a sleeping bag. But they did meet some interesting Territorians, including Irish Mac, one of the locals made famous by Jeannie Gunn's *We of the Never Never* (1908). Sampson's privately published book about his adventures, *Through Central Australia* (1933), quickly sold out its first run of 5500 copies and was reprinted three months later.

However, Sampson's adventures were tame compared to those of men like Michael Terry and Arthur Groom. Terry, whose personal papers are held by the National Library of Australia, was an army driver in Russia during World War I. He emigrated from England in 1919 and spent time in Western Australia before making his way to Sydney where he formed a transport company to service rural New South Wales.

above:

Unknown photographer
*With Rising Wind a Centralian
Desert Storm is about to Break*
1947

b&tw photograph; 15.6 x 20.7 cm
Pictures Collection

below left:

Michael Terry (1899–1981)
*Beneath the Overland Telegraph
Line from Adelaide to Darwin*
1923

gelatin silver photograph
7.3 x 9.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3078713





above:
Unknown photographer
Portrait of Arthur Groom,
Aged about 30 c.1934
gelatin silver photograph
16.1 x 12.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23161990

below:
Michael Terry (1899–1981)
Road over the Depot Sandhills
to Horseshoe Bend beside the
Finke River, 1928
gelatin silver photograph
28.2 x 34.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3068839

The lure of exploring the outback by motor car soon engrossed Terry. In 1922, he drove from Longreach to Katherine and, in the following year, he and Dick Yockney were the first people to travel westwards by car across Australia, from Winton to Broome. Over the next 32 years Terry went on 13 more exploring and prospecting expeditions, sometimes by camel but mostly by car. His journeys took him through the Canning Desert, north-west Australia, the Tanami and much of Central Australia, often along routes not travelled previously by motor vehicles. In 1930, he made the first vehicular tracks from Erldunda to the Petermanns and Uluru (Ayers Rock).

Terry documented his exploits in six books with titles which promised tales of intriguing adventure. They included *Across Unknown Australia* (1925), *Through a Land of Promise: With Gun, Car and Camera in the Heart of Northern Australia* (1927) and *Hidden Wealth and Hiding People* (1931). All proved very popular, as did the 50 plus articles he wrote for magazines and newspapers, such as *Pictorial Magazine*, *The Geographical Journal*, *People*, the *Adelaide Advertiser* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Eleven of Terry's articles appeared in *Walkabout* magazine. This was begun in 1934 by the Australian National Travel Association as a means of promoting Australia and the South Pacific at home and abroad. Its contributors included famous authors and identities such as Robert Henderson Croll, Charles Barrett, Ernestine

Hill, Charles Mountford, Bill Harney, Douglas Lockwood, Donald Thomson, George Farwell and T.G. Strehlow. Their stories were illustrated by the work of superb photographers such as Axel Poignant, Heather George, Adelle Hurley and Jennifer Humphreys.

Arthur Groom, whose papers are in the National Library of Australia, also wrote for *Walkabout*. He first experienced the Northern Territory as a jackeroo at Lake Nash station in the 1920s. He was one of the founders and the first secretary of the National Parks Association of Queensland. In 1933, Groom became the manager of Binna Burra Mountain Lodge in Lamington National Park, a position which he held until his death in 1953.

A dedicated conservationist and a 'remarkable walker', Groom carried out a 'thorough and exhaustive inspection' of the West MacDonnell Ranges in 1946. He returned to the Centre the following year with permission to enter the South-West Aboriginal Reserve, then off-limits to anyone without an approved purpose. With four camels to carry their supplies, Groom and his Aboriginal guides, Tajkaleri, Tamalji and Njunowa, travelled from Tempe Downs to Watarrka (Kings Canyon), Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta (the Olgas).

The beauty and the majesty of these places stunned Groom. He was struck by the 'grandeur and colour' of Watarrka, at Uluru he felt like 'an Ant at the Door of a Cathedral', while the Kata Tjuta were 'the most awesome sight I have ever seen'. Groom gave many talks about his experiences and published accounts of them in *Walkabout*, in newspapers in most Australian capitals and in his book *I Saw a Strange Land*. The first 1950 edition of 3000 sold out in eight months. A revised edition appeared in 1952.

After his return home, Arthur Groom agitated for the establishment of national parks in the West MacDonnells and at Uluru-Kata Tjuta. He saw such places as a buffer to keep visitors out of Aboriginal reserves. For him, it was also a way of regulating tourism, an industry he saw as having a tremendous bearing on the future of the Centre but which was developing rapidly and unchecked and was bringing much wanton destruction to the 'wild places'.





During World War II, as Michael Terry documented in his book *Bulldozer: The War Role of the Department of Main Roads, New South Wales* (1945), 'the Track' was straightened out and bituminised to become the Stuart Highway. 'The Bitumen' was only 13.2 metres wide and there were plenty of hazards in the form of potholes, anthills, roadside vegetation and animals. Nevertheless, as the longest stretch of bituminised road in inland Australia, it quickly became a tourist attraction in itself. In *Wealth in the Wilderness* (1955), published posthumously, Arthur Groom described 'the Bitumen' as a 'far-flung thread of a modern world laid right across a wilderness', which played a key role in the future development of the Northern Territory. He regarded it as 'one of the wonders of Australia' and travelling along it as an overpowering experience.

The writings of people like Michael Terry and Arthur Groom were just some of the many books and articles, along with numerous photographs, films and paintings, which created interest in the Northern Territory. Until the 1950s, however, it was difficult and expensive to get to, and many of the places described by Terry, Groom and others were not accessible to the ordinary tourist.

Much had changed by 1969 when author and journalist Colin Simpson visited the Territory in the course of research for his book *The New Australia* (1971). Simpson, whose papers are also in the National Library, had first visited the Territory in 1948 when he joined the American–Australian Expedition in western Arnhem Land and travelled to Melville Island with Axel Poignant. He recorded his experiences

for the ABC in his *Australian Walkabout* series and wrote them up in *Adam in Ochre: Inside Aboriginal Australia*. The first 1951 edition of 20 000 copies quickly sold out.

The Northern Territory described by Colin Simpson was very different to that encountered by earlier writers. The Centre was receiving about 30 000 visitors annually. Many headed out to Uluru where the establishment of the Ayers Rock–Mt Olga National Park had made the area accessible to tourists. Darwin was still a sleepy hole and Katherine 'had a tourist future but not a tourist present'. However, what later became Kakadu National Park was starting to be opened up and there were interesting developments elsewhere in the Top End, such as the bush tucker tours at Mica Beach.

Simpson subsequently became Australia's best-selling travel writer, producing books for a population increasingly interested in exploring both familiar and exotic overseas destinations. His subjects included New Zealand, the South Pacific, Scandinavia, Asia, Russia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, Europe and Africa.

As Simpson's *The New Australia* makes clear, a visit to the Northern Territory in the late 1960s was still a great adventure but one which had become more feasible for the ordinary person. The remote places described by Michael Terry and Arthur Groom had come within the reach of the average reader.

BAIBA BERZINS'S latest book is *Australia's Northern Secret: Tourism in the Northern Territory, 1920s to 1980s*. She will be giving a talk about 'the Bitumen' at the National Library of Australia on 16 April

above left:
Colin Simpson (1908–1983)
Tourist Buses Travel the Desert Roads
b&w photograph
Manuscripts Collection
MS 5253
Courtesy Julie Simpson

above right:
Colin Simpson (1908–1983)
A Tour Party Takes a Teabreak in the Shade
b&w photograph
Manuscripts Collection
MS 5253
Courtesy Julie Simpson