

BRIDGING THE DISTANCE

John Clark describes the current exhibition on show at the National Library of Australia

As we travelled across our continent—explored the interior, built roads, bridges and railways, looked for work, took holidays—we recorded our journeys in works of art, maps, diaries, letters and photographs. *Bridging the Distance*, a new exhibition at the National Library from 6 March to 15 June, displays some of these artefacts, many for the first time. Drawing on the Library's rich collections, the exhibition shows how we have responded to our country, its geography and its challenges.

Australians are used to distances—we have to be. Ours is a country of large distances and often difficult terrain, with a small population strung out along thin coastal belts, or scattered inland in smaller communities or remote areas.

For over 40 000 years, Indigenous people developed communication systems and travelling and trade routes. European settlers set up communication systems such as roads, railways and the telegraph, to enable them to establish and maintain their settlements, support agriculture and industry, and allow people to travel for work and for pleasure.

For many Australians, distance is the continent's defining characteristic, which is hardly surprising in a land so large. Measuring about 3700 kilometres north to south and 4000 kilometres east to west, and covering nearly 7.7 million square kilometres, Australia is the sixth largest country in the world. Today, some of our state governments administer areas as big as or bigger than some countries. Western Australia, for instance, is almost as large as India, the world's seventh largest country.

Australia's population of 21 million is, on the other hand, comparatively small. The United States of America (excluding Alaska and Hawaii), for example, covers roughly the same area but has a population of about 300 million.



An uncompromising terrain, of course, dictates the disparity. It restricts, indeed constricts, habitation. Arid and semi-arid land makes up about 70 per cent of the continent. In an era when, for the first time, 50 per cent of the world's population lives in cities, Australia's geography has contributed to confining almost 90 per cent of Australians to large cities, most of them nestled along the fertile coastal fringe. Little wonder that we end up travelling distances that people from other countries find daunting.

Historian Geoffrey Blainey used the term 'tyranny of distance' to describe the way in which our geographical isolation from the western world has shaped our character. Applied at a local level, the term also explains how the isolation of population centres *within* Australia has turned us into a nation of habitual travellers. We travel because we have to. Distance demands it. The cry from the back seat 'Are we there yet?' is always loudest in Australia.

Before European settlement, distances were covered on foot. For more than 40 000 years, Indigenous people have walked clearly defined and understood

M. Bass
Launceston Town, Tasmania 1878
oil on canvas; 44.4 x 53.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2310343

pathways. By agreement, they crossed each other's territories to meet for gatherings and ceremonies or to trade goods like ochre, shell and other valued materials, utensils such as sandstone grinding slabs, weapons and tools.

Indigenous travellers would cover large distances: up to 200 kilometres in coastal regions and 500 kilometres in desert zones. In one case, a boomerang was found 1200 kilometres away from the place where it was made.

Indigenous people are thought to have arrived by sea from South-East Asia sometime between 40 000 and 45 000 years ago, although some scholars argue they may have arrived as long ago as 70 000 years. Afterwards there were waves of arrivals. First came the explorers—the Dutch, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese—and then the traders, such as the Macassan trepang fishermen from Sulawesi. Later, the convicts and free settlers arrived from Britain, foreshadowing the twentieth century's wave of migrants from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Pacific.

The first European settlers knew little about the geography of their new home. The east coast, where they landed, had been charted just 18 years earlier and the hinterland was little more than guesswork. Understanding the new land required a grasp of its geography. Explorers began fanning out from Sydney, the first European foothold on the continent, looking for suitable grazing land to expand settlement.

But amid the distance and the harsh and difficult terrain, much would prove invisible to explorers' eyes. For Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills, it was food supplied by the land that they failed to see. Their expedition from Melbourne to the Gulf

of Carpentaria provided tragic evidence of the cost of ignoring the help and knowledge of local Aboriginal people. Although Wills recorded in his diary the Indigenous people's food preparation methods, he and Burke did not

follow their examples. Starvation and death were the result for all but one of their exploring party.

Some explorers saw things the significance of which they did not then understand. During his 1844–1846 expedition to settle the debate as to whether there was an inland sea, Charles Sturt noticed a 'broken hill' and rocks that seemed to contain a metal ore. It would be nearly 40 years before silver ore would be 'discovered' and mined along with zinc and lead, and the city of Broken Hill established.

For single-minded explorers like Edward John Eyre, distance was a magnet. So was the desert. Eyre's particular obsession was to open up stock routes through South Australia's arid hinterland. Finding his way blocked by a salt lake (later named Lake Eyre) on an expedition in 1840, Eyre chose to head west instead, towards Perth. The route took him and his party, with numerous difficulties, along the dry Great Australian Bight to Albany, in south-western Western Australia.

For decades now, Australians have taken to the road and sky for business, holidays or for the sheer joy of the journey. We travel to faraway places to get a better sense of the world, and make quiet pilgrimages to distant battlefields to gain a better sense of ourselves. Our local distances make the longest journeys bearable.

While we might take distance in our stride, this does not mean that it is always easy to deal with. Managing distance affects every aspect of our lives—how we work, where and how we live, how we socialise, where we holiday. Sometimes our route leads us full circle. As Bilbo Baggins says in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King* (1955),

'The Road goes ever on and on/Out from the door where it began'. This may well be the credo of Australia's latest societal group, the grey nomads, retired members of the baby-boomer generation who, like landlocked versions of a modern-day Matthew Flinders, circumnavigate Australia in their four-wheel-drives and caravans.

If distance is a fact of life for Australians, bridging the distance is a way of life. Our concern is, and has always been, how to manage distance—between capital cities and population centres, between agricultural centres and depots, between railheads and ports, between home and holiday spot.

John Flynn (1880–1951)
*An Elderly Woman Surrounded
by Three Girls Operating a Pedal
Wireless on a Porch* between
1912 and 1951
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24681856



Australians are a practical and inventive people. We adapt. We cope. Most of all, we move. The ingenuity and enthusiasm with which we have absorbed new technology, like the camera and mobile phone, are the same impulses that have prompted us to seek solutions to problems posed by distance and terrain, to make the journey shorter and less arduous.

At the beginning of European settlement, we didn't so much bridge the distance as throw fragile strands across it: a strand like the single wire of the Overland Telegraph Line. Completed in 1872, the line connected Port Augusta, in South Australia, and Port Darwin (now Darwin) 3200 kilometres to the north, and from there linked Australia to the world. There were invisible strands like the emergency messages sent later in the mid twentieth century via pedal-powered wireless transceivers to the Australian Inland Mission Aerial Medical Service founded by John Flynn.

Another remarkable achievement was the establishment of the Western Queensland Auto Aero Service Limited. Established in 1920 by former Australian Flying Corps officers W. Hudson Fysh and Paul McGinness, it provided an aerial bridge across the vast distances of north-western Queensland. In time, it became the Australian icon, Qantas.

These and other nascent services, such as early motorists' associations like the NRMA, RACV and RAA of South Australia, would grow to become national networks. The Australian Inland Mission Aerial Medical Service was the forerunner of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Together they have created a strong web of services that links the nation across our vast distances.

Historically, distance demanded much of governments and would lead to unnecessary and prolonged confusion. After railways were introduced in the 1850s, each colony chose a track width that best suited its needs. Before long, Australia hosted three entirely different systems—journeys interstate for goods and passengers generally required a change of trains. The main systems were not standardised until well into the 1950s and different gauges still remained on some lines.

Until the early twentieth century, most white Australians regarded our deserts as nowhere. They killed explorers and

were entirely unsuitable for cultivation. Only in some areas, notably the goldfields east of Perth, did they redeem themselves with their largesse of gold-bearing ore, making possible the establishment of new towns and attracting gold-seeking migrants to our shores.

After World War I, attitudes toward the interior began to change. One of the driving forces for a change of perspective was John Flynn. Flynn saw the limitless potential of Australia's desert regions, and argued that his service could lay the foundations of a new society. The desert, he argued, represented the true heart of the nation.

In time, the inland was revealed to Australians. In the late 1940s, thanks to the transformative powers of colour photographic film, it became the 'red centre' and a popular destination for travellers. But even today with the help of satellite imaging, much of the interior of the continent is still not intimately known.

Bridging the Distance enables viewers to follow in the footsteps of Australia's Indigenous people and European settlers as the continent was opened up to the developed community. By sharing what we have seen, discovered and experienced, we are each contributing toward bridging the distance between us.

JOHN CLARK is a freelance writer and can be contacted at johnclark@netspeed.com.au. *Bridging the Distance* can be seen at the Library from 6 March to 15 June 2008 and experienced online at www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/bridgingthedistance. The exhibition sponsor of *Bridging the Distance* is Qantas Airways, a company which, since its inception in 1922, has done much to bridge Australia's vast physical distances



top:
John Flynn (1880–1951)
Camels Carrying a Boat c.1920
coloured lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24382397

above:
Unknown photographer
*Hudson Fysh Cleaning up the BE2E,
Thargomindah, Queensland, 1921*
b&w photograph; 15.6 x 21.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3722866