Chapter 3

Interactive histories at Charlotte Waters Overland Telegraph Station

Introduction to interaction on the line

The ambitious Overland Telegraph Line construction project was designed to connect Australia to the rest of the modernising world, via central Australia and what was then the northern end of South Australia. In doing so, its proponents had the further overt intention of opening up the centre, ‘selecting that route which will traverse, for the greater part, country suitable for occupation, the settlement of which the line will so greatly facilitate’, as its director, Charles Todd reported.¹

The first lease in the area was the prime Dalhousie Springs lease, taken up by 1872 by EM Bagot, one of the surveyors on the line.² Thus, built into the telegraph line project at its foundations was, inevitably, some form of

¹ Todd 1885: 140.
² SRSA GRS 3570/1 unit 42 lease No 2213. (See fig 4.16).
'interaction' with the local country and the Indigenous people whose home it was. This interaction was first with the explorers of the region, then with surveyors for the line, followed by the construction teams, and then those who maintained and used the telegraph line and its associated tracks. The line was a fast ‘long fuse laid’ from the southern white ‘settled areas’ into the centre, burning into the networks of the lives already being lived there. Together with the Morse code signals that sped along the wire, the Overland Telegraph Line transmitted change, fuelled by intercultural interactions of diverse forms.

However, not everything changed, even in the heat of the sudden, indelible rupture of the patterns of life that the line wrought. There were also continuities. Continuity and transformation are not clear-cut opposites but are inter-related. Both dimensions can co-exist, with a constant tension between them. In this state of tension sits a latent ambivalence that ‘the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction’. That is, the form or process of change is contiguous with, and coherent according pre-existing expectations, understandings and forms of practice. WEH Stanner grapples with ‘what changes and yet stays itself’ in his 1958 essay ‘Continuity and change’.

Continuity in social and material forms and in practices is not a static state, an absence of change, but is equally a dynamic state. In order to stay more-or-less the same requires active monitoring and maintenance. People’s actions may be just as much directed towards maintaining relations and social reproduction as towards altering them.

Anthropologist Francesca Merlan argues that a focus on intercultural interaction forces us to look at how people may reproduce or change relationships, depending on circumstances. She interprets interaction as the interplay of different expectations, understandings and forms of practice where every interaction has the potential to be a zone of reproduction and change.

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3 Judith Wright’s term from ‘Sanctuary’ 1955, used by Mike Smith 2005: 11.
5 Stanner 1979: 42. See also Read and Engineer Jack Japaljarri 1978: 147-8.
6 Merlan 2005.

146
What forms of interaction were set up by the intervention of the Overland Telegraph Line? How did the local people respond to them? What difference to their response did the age and gender of those involved make? What elements changed and which were maintained and reproduced? To what degree were there choices available? These questions are the central theme of this chapter. I track expanding dimensions of interaction in the Charlotte Waters area. In these is a shift from circumstances which generate points of interaction that constitute an interface between two separate cultural entities, through to increasingly intricate interactions. The latter involve the emergent mutual production and reproduction of all those involved in the dialogue, and are capable of producing new forms, while old ones also continue to exist.\(^7\)

**Interaction as framework**

‘Interaction’ is the blanket term I have used, in the broadest sense of ‘an action or influence of persons or things on each other’. It does not necessarily imply direct two-way exchanges, and includes everything from overt physical violence to appraisal at a distance, or avoidance, or encounters with a footprint rather than a person, for example. It is the shorthand for the multiple processes which generate the entangled historical quality of contemporary places. ‘Exchange’ – ‘to give and receive reciprocally’ – is one potential component of an interaction that has a slightly narrower, though related, sense. Exchange can be of goods, commodities or services, and includes knowledge exchanged for goods, or one service exchanged for another, for example. It is not always involved in an interaction.

To trace the mechanisms by which transformations or continuities were generated, we need to get closer to the processes of interaction than is allowed by the official or dominant published stories of technological achievement and heroic endeavour such as those by Charles Todd (1885), Richards (1914), Frank Clune (1955), Peter Taylor (1980). In order to get closer, I focus on a specific

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\(^7\) See Hinkson and Smith 2005.
context of interaction. This is the Charlotte Waters repeater station, the most central of the eleven repeater stations on the telegraph line.\(^8\)

Charlotte Waters is a key context of interaction in which to follow change through time: - in the form of interaction, what is emphasised by those interacting, in the occasions when they occurred, and in the materials involved. The form and location of the buildings as they were initially established (described in chapter 2 and briefly below) was the setting for the interactions that followed. The configuration of the place influenced how people interacted. This socio-spatial organisation can be followed into the present. As archaeologists Robin Torrence and Anne Clarke point out ‘the social, economic and political trajectories initiated by the enforced colonisation and settlement of Indigenous lands did not stop … but the processes and consequences of historical cross-cultural encounters continue into the present day’.\(^9\) In this approach, the place, Charlotte Waters, acts as a kind of fixed-lens camera, with the local aspects of large-scale processes seen through it over time. Other examples of a long term historical approach based in a single location are the work of McBryde and Smith: Archaeologist and ethno-historian Isabel McBryde carried out one of the few such studies of the changing practices of exchange during the first forty years of European-Aboriginal interaction between the Aboriginal people and the colonists at Port Jackson, early Sydney.\(^10\) She argues that ‘exchange continues as a vital part of the process of mediating survival for indigenous and settler participants’. She demonstrates that for the Aboriginal people involved, despite the ‘dominant alien social system acquiring permanence’, exchange ‘maintained its role of negotiating difference and facilitating social co-existence and preserved cultural identity in a landscape no longer theirs to control’.\(^11\) Looking at these exchange processes in central

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\(^8\) The basis of the 1870s telegraph line was a 2000 mile long open iron wire, resting on insulators attached to poles. The morse messages were made by closing and opening an electrical circuit - generated by a cluster of glass cell batteries - with a transmitter. There was leakage of the current along the wire, and mist, dust, spiders, cracks in the insulators, solar flares, all acted to reduce the amount of current conducted along the wire. Repeaters were therefore necessary. An incoming message was read by an operator there who wrote them down and re-sent them, or, later an electro-magnetic relay repeated the incoming message (O’Grady 1972: 20-23).


Australia, another archaeologist writing history, Mike Smith, pieced together the history of several generations of interactions between the Kukatja families of western Central Australia with white explorers, administrators and pastoralists. He frames this long term history around one locale, the large rock shelter he excavated, occupied for 22,000 years.\footnote{Smith 2005.}

The events and processes I draw out around Charlotte Waters are particular to the western Simpson Desert area. They are comparable to those in other areas along the telegraph line, but not representative of them. The impact of, and responses to, major influxes of unprecedented people, objects and practices were not homogeneous, either spatially or temporally. Each of the eleven repeater stations, on average 250 kilometres apart, had a differing environmental context. Each was inserted into the land of a different Indigenous language group. In each, its presence initiated distinctive accretionary and contingent histories of interaction.\footnote{Gillen 1968: 15, 18; Mulvaney 2000: 33-4, 186.}

Each repeater station was a particularly concentrated circumstance for interaction. As well as being the base for a staff of six white telegraph workers, they were also official centres for regional government with responsibilities for customs and for collecting votes, supporting regional policing and distributing rations.\footnote{Gillen 1968: 15, 18; Mulvaney 2000: 33-4, 186.} They were also crucial way-stations for all travellers along the lone arterial route across the continent, which was followed by all non-locals - travellers, stockmen, officials such as police, inspectors of land, scientists and welfare inspectors, suppliers of stores, administrators and maintenance crews. The track was thus another focus for interactions, as discussed below.

An individual telegraph station was not a single, unitary place. This is clear from the surface archaeological record and the existing textual descriptions of where people lived. Rather, it was made up of a heterogeneous network, or cluster, of distinct configurations of different people, different ways of using the spaces, and satellites of associated places around the main station. These spatial
patternings, which constituted the place along lines of social distinction, are explored further below.

In this chapter, I examine different aspects of interaction and the specificities of the change and continuity as they were lived out near Charlotte Waters, slowing the blur of these continuous dynamics so that they can be seen more clearly. Recent historical analyses have shown that it is possible to extract telling details embedded within white observers’ descriptions of early cross-cultural interactions to gain insights about the performance of meeting and response, the interpretation of responses and the situated nature of the practices of social interaction. I have also drawn on material evidence and spatial configurations to discover elements of interaction that were not necessarily articulated by those living them out in the place.

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PART I: Expanding dimensions of interaction in the Charlotte Waters area

There is a rapid, uneven escalation in the dimensions of interaction in the Charlotte Waters area. The rate, duration and form of interactions alter as explorer and then settler incursions intensify. Initially there are short, localised and disbursed points of encounter between John McDouall Stuart and the local people in the 1860s. These extend into a more two-dimensional continuous chain or line of more frequent encounters, as the survey teams move through in the 1870s. The participants tend to bring more prior experience to the encounters. These extend yet further into a three-dimensional surface or topography of interaction as the repeater station is established and pastoral leases such as Dalhousie Springs are taken up on the back of the bridgehead that the telegraph line cut into the area. At the same time as these structural intensifications, the specific locations of the encounters and the individuals involved also play into their outcomes and tenor.

1 Points of encounter

John McDouall Stuart favoured small parties for his explorations, lightly supplied, without wagons. As part of his fifth expedition in 1860-1, 10 men and horses passed along the edge of the western Simpson, through the Bagot Range to the Stevenson on 1 February 1861 (fig 1.2 and 3.1). They named Lindsay Creek, and encountered a large waterhole there where ‘many natives, tall powerful fellows, were seen, but we did not speak with them’.15 They crossed the creek they named the ‘Coglin’, north to the Finke River.16 They dug into its broad, sandy bed to find water, but were unsuccessful. However, they then ‘discovered six native wells’ near ‘a large camping place of the natives’, where the ground for 100 yards was covered with ‘worleys, and at one spot they seemed to have had a grand corroboree, the earth being trodden quite hard, as if a large number had been dancing upon it in a circle’. They describe a spear left behind ‘10 feet long, with a flat round point, the other end for throwing with a womera’. After they made another hole for water here, ‘the natives annoyed them much by setting fire to the grass in every direction’.17

We can suppose that Stuart had intervened inappropriately in an important gathering place, a profound breach of the local people’s rights to be acknowledged as the holders of that country and of the expected etiquette for strangers. The local people took action to drive them away by burning.18

They were defending their country, as is clearly described in an Indigenous account of Stuart’s travels through the area. The account was recorded by Charles Mountford in 1938, told to him by Tim, who was a local, presumably Lower Southern Arrernte man, working as an employee on Mt Dare station.

16 Stuart had named the Finke River, further north, on his fourth expedition, in April 1860 [1865: 249, 149].
17 Stuart 1865: 250.
18 They had taken similar action earlier, south at Neales Creek where due to dysentery Stuart had stayed several days, and ‘during his stay, the natives, while studiously keeping themselves out of sight, set fire to the surrounding grass’ 21 January 1861 [Stuart 1865: 248].
Fig 3.1: Detail of western Simpson area from ‘Map of Stuart’s discoveries in the continent of Australia from 1858 to 1862 also fixing the Centre’. Track of the 1861 and 1862 expeditions shown. From insert map in Stuart 1865.
He was ‘an Emu man’ who knew the songs for the country, including those for Charlotte Waters. He was aged about 60 according to Mountford, so was born when the telegraph line was in full operation. His ‘old people, mother and father’ had ‘given him’ this account of their interaction with unprecedented forms of tracks, with white men and horses, the explanations they arrived at for what they saw, and its partial accommodation in their own world view. They would have been children when Stuart came through if Mountford is roughly correct about Tim’s age. Tim’s account of the use of fire to drive away the incomers, below, overlaps directly with Stuart’s described experience above.

Stuart (according to Tim) came from ‘Melbourne’ travelled west of Charlotte Waters where he made a camp and looked around the country. The natives were very afraid of the white men and particularly the horses, when the natives saw these strange long legged beasts, they ran away and after a long talk among the old men decided to scare both the human and animal intruders away by a large number of smoke fires. This was unsuccessful, but they did notice that the white man left his camp to travel north almost immediately.

The first time the natives saw the boot tracks of white men, they were sorely puzzled as to what kind of animal made the tracks but decided that it was that of some malignant spirit which they called Agnura. The natives were afraid of the horses on the first journey north, would not even approach the tracks, thought the beast would follow them, even if their tracks were adjacent.

Stuart returned through the country some time later. The natives considered the cause of his return was the bush had torn their clothes and they had to go back for more and horses as well.

On Stuart’s return journey the natives were not as afraid, and actually approached the camp. Stuart or his men gave the natives some food, which although they took it politely, threw it away as soon as the donor’s back was turned. Stuart returned after having reached the ‘Top End’. He did not shoot anyone or cause any trouble.¹⁹

TGH Strehlow provides a parallel account of local people’s reactions to the sighting of unprecedented footprints, at Burt Plain, further north of Alice Springs. Old men in 1933, they reported to Strehlow that

¹⁹ Mountford’s diaries of the ‘Leichhardt expedition’ 1938 held in the H.L Sheard collection, Rare Books and Special collections, State Library of South Australia.
The boot tracks looked as though they had been made by human beings; but what kind of creatures could men be who had broad, flat, toe-less feet, and a heel that was a hard lump, sharply edged from the main part of the foot? As for the horse tracks, we could tell that they must have been made by huge four-legged creatures, larger than any we had ever seen before. These creatures, too, had no toes, and their heavy feet had cut their way even into hard clay ground, and left their scars on the rock plates. Surely, we thought, both these kinds of creatures must be evil man-eating monsters! Perhaps they were some of those man-eating monsters that prowled about at night and normally attacked men without leaving any tracks behind.20

What do you do when the unprecedented walks through your home?
That these oral records have been retained for over 70 years,21 handed on to two generations, is as telling as their content. This was a memorable event for the Indigenous people involved. Here we see people in a quick, contained encounter. They speculate about each other, and set up the expectations which will feed into later encounters. The stress in the story for both parties – in both senses of the word – lies in the external details and unfamiliar elements.

Both Indigenous accounts associate the novel and intimidating experiences described with the name of Stuart. They recognise his role as prime mover in bringing the unprecedented into the country. The storytellers have refreshed their accounts as further information concerning the events was acquired, actively up-dating them. They describe their earlier incomprehension at the point of contact with a knowing, post hoc, almost humorous edge from the position of their 1930s immersion in the outcomes of the enormity of the change that those encounters set in train.

For the local people, the first and most startling manifestations were the footprints. The ground is an active social surface for them, no mere neutral backdrop. Both as hunters and as holders of the stories of the Ancestors whose

21 Stuart’s passage through the country appears to have been a constant in the local repertoire of stories. It is also told by Jim Kite, or Erilikilyika, in 1913 (see below). One of his carved boomerangs shows Stuart’s party on horses and a group of the locals creeping up behind them. Kite interprets this depiction to a journalist, who focuses in his record on fear of the horses: ‘when the riders dismounted, the natives set up a withering howl of fear. Mercy! The apparitions had spilt in two!’ (Adelaide Observer July 26 1913: 36, 50).
actions produced signs in the surface of the land, that surface is constantly being scanned and read as an index to what has taken place. The ground surface is the repository of imprints of action. There is a binding connection between the print and the Ancestor, or person or animal that makes it, and so the imprint is an equal carrier of whatever power its maker carries. A print with such unfamiliar features had no referent, except, speculatively, the supernatural. Thus the unknown tracks were as dangerous for their observer as their unknown maker. The unprecedented cutting of hard ground and rock by iron-shod hooves was especially intimidating for the local observers of the detail of the ground. Now, it stands as an uneasy harbinger of the rapid compaction of the ground by hard-hoofed stock that would soon follow. The meaningful, story-laden surfaces of the ground were being irreversibly transformed. But not the local people’s capacity to read them, remembered in their history of minute attention to the observable forms of cultural difference.

The terms of engagement were inherently incompatible. In their attention to the unprecedented, the local people were brought up against a sudden, intrusive apprehension of other forms of life, radically different and yet, in the end apparently human, and requiring speculation regarding how this difference could have come about. This required modification or extension of their existing theories of difference to explain expectation of distinctions from other social groups. In contrast, the surveyors and construction team members knew why they were there, they considered that they had a right to be there, their concepts of difference were laden with assumptions of technological and social superiority, and they were in a hurry. They expected to see ‘natives’ and approached the prospect of encounter with wariness, varying degrees of curiosity and a preparedness to shoot.

For the local people, meetings with strangers were governed by protocols. Baldwin Spencer describes the ceremonies required by such a meeting in Alice Springs in the 1890s. But in the absence of appropriate understanding of the

24 Spencer 1928: 239-245.
gestures and performances being enacted, but not shared, and with neither party registering what was being offered or expected, these were inevitably misread. Historian Maria Nugent draws out the important role of the performance of avoidance, nonchalance, retreat in early encounters at Botany Bay where ‘speed was never a priority’. In contrast, Stuart went directly into core places such as the cluster of huts and ceremonial ground described above, and targeted prime water places. Their haste and indiscretion, and the fact they were all men, marked the surveyors and construction team members as hostile. Baldwin Spencer says any party of men without women ‘is always looked on with suspicion’ and TGH Strehlow points out:

the very mode of progress practiced by the white foreigners was one that was normally adopted in Aboriginal Australia only by roving bands of avengers when they were stealing their way through hostile country in order to surprise and slay their unsuspecting victims.

Rejection of the first exchange, the gift of food, that Tim’s account records, is significant. Similar accounts of early rejection of gifts are familiar elsewhere in Australia. For example, Isabel McBryde shows that in early encounters at Port Jackson, gift exchange was an important means of communication, an element of greetings and farewells, or negotiations of political dealings. Refusal of a gift, while attributed to simple distaste for strange food, is potentially also a demonstration of non-reciprocity; an expression of unwillingness to enter into an open-ended relation of indebtedness. Exchange is always ‘a political process, one in which wider relationships are expressed and negotiated in a personal encounter’, as will be discussed further below.

At Port Jackson, the members of the First Fleet, with prior experience in the Pacific and North America, came expecting to engage with ‘the natives’ in exchange. They arrived with trade items at the ready, wanting to establish

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27 Spencer 1928: 239.
peaceful, close relations. Governor Phillip’s stated intention was to ‘give them a high opinion of their new guests’.  

There was no similar provisioning of the survey teams for the Overland Telegraph Line.

Building the line: “In less than 18 months 2000 miles of telegraph through the wastes and solitudes of a vast unknown interior”

In the account given to Charles Mountford by Tim, there is a clear association of Stuart with the massive influx of the people, objects and practices that followed soon after along the same route:

Sometimes afterwards, a big mob of people with sheep goats and wagons came along and put up the overland telegraph line. There was no trouble here, everyone was quiet, both black and white. Some of the natives even worked on the line, cutting poles. … The old abos [sic] did not attach any importance to the telegraph line, just thought it was something belonging to the white man, like his wagons, boots and other paraphernalia.

The South Australian government’s agreed timetable, to complete a line to Port Darwin through central Australia by 1 January 1872 in order to meet the undersea cable being built from Singapore via Indonesia, was a punishing one. To meet it, Charles Todd, who orchestrated the project, took care in selecting good officers and men with ‘zeal and intelligence’, and providing ‘efficient transport power’ of ‘thoroughly good staunch horses and bullocks’. Many of the surveyors and overseers were Lands Department employees who had prior experience working in arid Australia and the Northern Territory. However, for the central section of the line, from north of Port Augusta to Attack Creek, crossing the western Simpson area, they had only Stuart’s recent exploration map (fig 3.1) and the follow-up 1870 survey led by John Ross to go by.

They expected harsh conditions: ‘we heard that the whole country for miles north of the Peake was one mass of stones, on which our vehicles would

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31 McBryde 2000a: 249.
32 Giles 1894 Vol 2 (8): 60.
33 Mountford’s diaries of the ‘Leichhardt expedition’ 1938, held in the H.L Sheard collection, Rare Books and Special collections State Library of South Australia.
34 Todd 1885: 143.
inevitably be smashed to pieces before we got half through ... terrible accounts also of the dense rolling red sandhills and spinifex country and the impenetrable mulga, the intense heat, the flies, ants etc etc’ wrote surveyor and sub-overseer on the central section of the line, Christopher Giles.\(^{35}\)

They feared ‘native’ attack. Todd’s instructions on how to carry out the construction of the line for the overseers in the central section included directives regarding those natives the party might meet. The men were to treat them ‘kindly but firmly’; native camps were not to be visited; there was to be no communication with the women; native property was not to be touched; and they were only to fire on the natives when attacked, when it was necessary for their safety.\(^{36}\) Alfred Giles, Christopher’s brother, employed on the initial survey for the route of the line in 1870, wrote

> The best way to handle wild blacks is never to allow them within spear distance of the camp. We could have got rid of them quicker by sharp and rougher methods, but our instructions were to treat them as peaceably as possible everywhere, especially, as the first party through, we should set the best example possible for the sake of those to follow.\(^{37}\)

Christopher Giles, following with a telegraph construction team was ‘Well armed although we scarcely expected to meet with hostile natives for the first hundred miles’.\(^{38}\) The Peake station, west of Lake Eyre, was considered the edge of the frontier.\(^{39}\)

No overt provision was made in the extensive lists of stores and equipment carried for diplomatic gifts for the ‘natives’ encountered. However, one incident described by Christopher Giles suggests that exchange was assumed to be a valid form of interaction by members of the survey team.

### 2 The line of interaction is incised

Near the locale that was soon to become Charlotte Waters repeater station, Christopher Giles records an encounter by his surveying party, late in 1870:

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\(^{35}\) Giles 1894 vol 2 (11): 83.  
\(^{36}\) cited by Gooley 1972: 14, 16.  
\(^{37}\) A. Giles 1926[1995]: 60.  
\(^{38}\) C. Giles 1894 vol 2(11): 84.  
158
We ran short of provisions and worst of all, tobacco! I had been for some time using the dried leaves of the native tobacco plant (not pitcherry) which grew luxuriantly in some of the creek beds ... a wretched substitute for the real article ... we obtained relief, however, in a somewhat novel way. On the afternoon ... we saw a tribe of blacks crossing a flat, as they didn't run away on seeing us, I felt sure they had mixed with whites before, and consequently must have - tobacco! ... without waiting for them to approach nearer, I rode towards them as fast as my limping horse could carry me, and brandishing my empty meerschaum, I went full tilt up to the astonished savages, and by signs with the empty pipe demanded an immediate surrender of what they might possess of the inestimable narcotic. I was referred to the ladies of the company, who were still some way to the rear. On their arrival they put down their loads, and their worthy spouses immediately began a search among their treasures for the coveted weed, and oh, joy! Nearly a whole stick!

Two minutes more and three ardent devotees were ecstatically ‘burning the idol’ and distributing pieces of dry damper and some flour amongst our benefactors, who seemed very pleased to render us the service as well as amused at our extravagant behaviour. They had news for us too, for amidst cries of ‘Whitefellow! Whitefellow!’ they pointed to the smoke of the expedition camp fires a couple of miles ahead ... 40

From this humorously framed anecdote, we gain a detailed picture of a group of traveling local people, the women and the men walking separately. The women are carrying sticks of tobacco that they must have obtained from some other exchange: either a direct one-off acquisition from other construction teams, or perhaps through a chain of exchanges with other Aboriginal groups who had been in contact with whites further south. Their existing exchange networks were long-range and active, bringing goods to the centre from the south coast, the east side of the Simpson and the Gulf of Carpentaria, 41 and new goods entered into these networks immediately. 42

Commercial tobacco has a direct parallel with native tobacco or pituri, as the four species that grow in Central Australia share its Nicotiana genus. The dried leaves were mixed with ash and chewed as a mild stimulant and to reduce

40 Giles 1894 vol 3(4): 30.
hunger. It was a highly valued and widely traded item in the Simpson Desert as elsewhere. Speculatively, part of the local people’s willingness to enter into this exchange may have been because it was an appropriate action for this substance. From their point of view the exchange may have fitted better with ‘conventions and expectations of pre-contact practice’ and was less ambiguous than other items offered for exchange. It may have carried less onerous implications for establishment of a continuing exchange relationship.

The group accept, or appear to, the food offered on this occasion. The women are happy to be involved in the dealings. They have acquired the English word ‘whitefellows’ for the incomers.

Giles draws his humour in this encounter from the irony he sees in its departure from the standard assumption that the whitefellows would be the benefactors in any such encounter. That they are the mendicants here is embroidered as an amusing one-off story against himself. That he has a positive attitude towards Aboriginal people (see chapter 2) also flavours this particular episode.

It is clear that the local people are attentively watching every action of the intruders in their country, aware of where they are and what they are doing. This is a friendly interchange. Presumably the survey team did not trespass in any key places, and behaved within the acceptable Indigenous parameters for groups on the move at this early stage of interaction. This acceptability would soon change.

### 3 Establishment of Charlotte Waters as a topography of interaction

Five telegraph construction working parties, roughly following Stuart’s track north to the central section of the Overland Telegraph Line, left Adelaide in early September 1870. Each party consisted of 19 men, 15 horse wagons, 17

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44 Read and Engineer Jack Japaljarri 1978 describe the efforts made by a western desert group in 1928, recently exposed to European tobacco, to acquire more through negotiation and unprecedented travel routes.
bullock drays and one bullock wagon, plus five express wagons. Two thousand sheep travelled with a separate party. The wagons were loaded with rations, medical drugs, telegraph materials – 1500 metal poles, wire, insulators – firearms, canteens and fishing gear, ironmongery, saddlery.\textsuperscript{46}

In contrast to the nuanced Indigenous reading of the tracks on the ground, the telegraph line construction party sent a mobile ‘wagonette on ahead to find the best route and watering places and to make a track for the others to follow slowly behind’\textsuperscript{47}: one recognisable track in an otherwise blank ocean of the unknown. The only meanings the ground bore for them were those they brought with them.

For the local people tracking them, it would soon have become obvious that while previous strangers had kept moving, these cumbersome invaders were behaving differently. They began quarrying rock and cutting trees to build solid structures, running stock in the waterholes, flattening the grass, planting seeds in the bank of the river.\textsuperscript{48} The options for contexts of interaction were suddenly shifting into an entirely new configuration. They were altering the landscape on a wide and enduring scale. They were not going away.

In January 1871 the construction party arrived at the site selected for the Charlotte Waters repeater station by Ross’ 1870 preliminary exploring expedition. Construction commenced.

It is January 1871: The recent summer rains had been good, although the builders were unaware that they were exceptional, describing grasses ‘as green as emerald’ available for horses and 200 sheep.\textsuperscript{49} A horse cart bumps noisily over the distant ironstone covered hill as it carries white sandstone from a quarry 12 miles away for the walls of the main building, and for the smith’s forge.\textsuperscript{50} Trees are felled along the Finke River for the mess store and the smith’s

\textsuperscript{46} Todd 1885 143; SLSA PRG 161/1.
\textsuperscript{47} Giles 1894 vol 2: 84.
\textsuperscript{48} Giles 1894 Vol 3(5): 38.
\textsuperscript{49} Giles 1894 Vol 3(5): 38.
\textsuperscript{50} Giles 1894 Vol 3(5): 38.
and carpenter’s sheds of the emergent Charlotte Waters repeater station, and for the many telegraph poles. The site was chosen due to the water present in a dry area. ‘We solemnly filled our pannicans with water and named the ‘waters’ Charlotte Waters after Lady Charlotte Bacon, sixth daughter of the Earl of Oxford (Byron’s Ianthe).’ In such re-naming lies a whole history. This set of references, to a relative of their own team, to English aristocracy and to its high culture was a first step in tying intractable, unfamiliar landscape into the known; the start of the effort to domesticate it. This new placename and ‘Coglin Creek’ displaced that of Kirrki-idningkala waterhole, which is associated with the Arkaya or Kestrel History, which tells the History of the formation of the Lower Finke River (see box in chapter 2), and the name for the place which Gillen gives in his diary: ‘Alknulurilirra’, an important rain centre.

The chosen site was on the highest ground above the waterhole, thought to be defensible against anticipated attack by local Aboriginal people. Its treeless surrounds were always spoken of in terms of isolation, dreariness and shadeless heat. The building was constructed to be defensible, with a walled courtyard at the back and no doors at the front initially. Photographs show that it was not only solidly built, with well-dressed stone, but built to impress, with attention given to decorative detail, such as on the top of the large front chimney, and in the surrounds of the back gate and side piers (see chapter 2).

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Part II ‘Playing at telegraph lines’

The construction of Charlotte Waters stayed in the memory of local Aboriginal people watching it to such an extent that it stood as a significant temporal marker 34 years later. The explorer Henry Vere Barclay records a local Indigenous man saying that a claypan that was encountered as a dry swamp in

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51 Lady Charlotte was the mother of Bacon, the man in charge of stores for the central section of the line. She was a friend of the poet Byron, and he dedicated his poem ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ to her (Richards 1914: 15).
52 Hercus and Potezny 1993.
1905, held 11 feet of water at the time of the construction.\textsuperscript{54} He was a child at that time and the advent of the Overland Telegraph Line had made a lasting impression.

We have an insight into the process by which such a lasting impression would be imprinted on a child growing up in the vicinity of the repeater station’s construction. Christopher Giles’ remarks that he has ‘several times been amused by seeing where the native children had been playing at putting up telegraph lines on the broad sandy bed of the river by ranging long sticks in a line’.\textsuperscript{55} Not just once, note, but several times.

This observation is arresting, in the same way that the description of the dancing with the troops with Darug people of the NSW coast in 1788 is unexpected and surprising.\textsuperscript{56} It introduces us to a dynamic that calls for close attention. It is not a familiar scenario within standard accounts of the frontier. It performs that deceptively simple service of giving the past its present, a present in which there is childhood, learning, surprise and the detail of what it is like to experience these. I will attend to the detail here, as it enters into the heart of what we tryin g to understand; it offers a way of witnessing the personal, intimate daily context of a grand, national-scale historical event.

First of all, there is the unexpectedness of the manifestation of a child’s perspective – which was sufficiently unexpected to ‘amuse’ Giles and cause him to record the child’s eye view of his work. Their attention to the events in their home ground, and the form that it takes are noteworthy. That it was recorded as happening is equally so.

Imagine the children hanging back, hidden behind some available cover, watching the strangers.

\textsuperscript{54} Barclay 1916: 16.
\textsuperscript{55} Giles 1894 Vol 3(6): 44.
\textsuperscript{56} Clendinen 2007: 8-9.
In the river bed, the men would have been cutting gum trees for the seven-
metre high telegraph poles, the sound of chopping filling the air as they shape
them, cart them on wagons, attach insulators and metal foot plates and strain to
pull them up with ropes, shouting and clanging (fig 3.2). All this would be
repeated over and over again, one pole every 80 metres. Giles says the children
were ‘playing at telegraph lines’ but of course they did not know that was what
they were playing at. They were playing at imitation - perhaps parody - of these
strange, perplexing, even funny novelties. Without any inkling of the purpose
of these actions, what would they make of all this repeated activity, one pole
after another, over and over again? No women. Strange animals. Strange
coverings on pale bodies. Strange words and sounds from strange materials.
We can imagine the children imitating the mannerisms and behaviour of the
men as they placed their sticks, making what Nicholas Thomas has described as
a ‘material expression of the foreign’. In doing so, they were creating a
narrative for themselves of what they saw. They thereby began to accommodate
the confronting strangeness of it, and to build it into their own bodily sense of
what the world now contained.

This rarely articulated perspective of a local child provides a chink in the
dominant framing of the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line as an epic
feat of endurance and courage and technical achievement. In the children’s
play we can see how the seeds of radical change could come to be incorporated
into people’s lives. It reminds us to pay close attention to the mechanisms by
which social and material transformations and continuities could be lived out in
the area.

The ethno-botanist Peter Latz who grew up with Arrernte children at
Hermansburg in the 1950s remembers a series of forms of play from his own
childhood. He says ‘for desert Aboriginal people much of the children’s play
was connected with everyday adult activities and was a learning process
couraged by adults’.

58 eg Taylor 1980; Clune 1955; Richards 1914.
Fig 3.2: Process of construction. ‘Construction of the Overland Telegraph to Port Darwin’, wood engraving from a photograph by J.H. Nixon, Melbourne, 1870?, from an illustrated newspaper, by Calvert, Samuel, 1828-1913
Girls made dolls from branches tied together with plant fibres, and intricate fibre string games were played by both adults and children. Boys made toy spears from grass stems and cut disks from bark as rolling targets, and toy boomerangs were made from gum tree bark. Winged seed capsules and seeds were flown in play, vines used for skipping, and toy boats were made. Latz also describes a girl’s ‘story game’ where sand is smoothed out to form an arena and leaves are used to represent people in action, which seems to display the same elements as the game Giles observed.

Another glimpse of the forms of children’s play comes from an Aboriginal satellite camp at Finke Well, nine miles from Charlotte Waters. In 1912 James Robert Beattie Love, carrying out an ‘enquiry into the conditions of life among the Aboriginals of the interior of Australia under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church’ observes that ‘… One small boy used nightly to resort to a sloping sapling, where, perched ridey-horse fashion, he would away in glee. Two others seemed great chums, and spent most of the day in throwing small spears at each other or practicing throwing the boomerang’.  

Spencer also notes the form of children’s play:

Out in the scrub with their tiny digging sticks they mimic the action of their mothers and at and age when the white child is learning to read books, they are busy, all unconscious to themselves, learning to read the book of nature. They gradually come to know where to find bulbs and seeds that are good to eat, and to recognise the tracks of every animal, large and small, that burrows in the ground or nests in the trees.

In this play there is observation and imitation, modelling of the adult world, and in modelling, incorporation of it. The children Giles observed had drawn away from the main centre of the action they are imitating, to a familiar, safe space. They can play because they are confident enough to do so, in their as-yet intact, coherent social world. At the same time, they may well have been picking up on their parent’s negative reactions to these intruders, and playing to allay their fears.

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60 Love 1912: 25.
61 Spencer 1912: 190.

Theirs was a performance involving startling novelties, but carried out in the context of their known place and the familiar act of playing in it. Through that continuity, they were making a way to build new actions, materials, animals, words, concepts, and expectations into their own world of experience. In observing and representing change to themselves they were taking it in, finding a way of joining the story of it into the stories of themselves through action, as they did not have words for it.

A key distinction here lies in the difference between representation to oneself of others’ actions, and representation by others of ones’ own actions. These both involve translations across the gulf of cultural differences, but the power differentials mean that we most commonly have only the latter, as recorded by colonial observers of local people. The creative representation of others to oneself is a theme seen again in the life of Erlikilyika, born in the vicinity of Charlotte Waters and one of the two Aboriginal men who accompanied Spencer and Gillen on their year long ethnographic expedition. His creative responses to rapidly changing circumstances are discussed below.

The children’s reactions highlight the diverse array of responses to the interactions set in train in the locale that was fast becoming Charlotte Waters. The children would be the transitional generation that grow up incorporating more than one source and structure of experience. Compare the children’s reactions with those of the adults. For those who were already adult in 1860, there would always be the tension of necessity to translate experience gained in an intact, coherent ‘one-hundred-year-present’ of experience, memory and connections in which they could be confident of their own centrality, into a world that was uncertain and differently premised.

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62 Rose 1999: 4 - ‘The period I call a one-hundred-year present can be understood precisely as a practice of ‘now’ - a set of transitions and transactions. Memory, expectation and attention are brought to bear in social life as tools for understanding the meaning of events, for determining their moral valence, if any, and for finally determining whether they are to endure or to be left to wash away.’
This is not to suggest that the incursions by explorers and the telegraph line were a ‘frontier Year Zero’ of change for the local people. These adults had dealt with previous interactions with other groups. There is evidence of marked dynamism in population movements in central Australia in the recent decades before the colonial incursions. Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytatjara groups moved from the north-west of South Australia eastwards to the Finke and Oodnadatta, and southwards towards the Bight, with inevitable re-negotiation of relations to lands and to each other. The Southern Arrernte language and kinship group ‘apparently spread down the Finke at some time in the past, probably not very long ago’ according the anthropologist AP Elkin working in northern South Australia in the 1930s. He describes their distinctive Arrernte kinship terminology and marriage rules compared to the groups around them, retaining qualities of Arrernte groups to the north. Luise Hercus says:

People were acutely aware that there could be changes: thus the Ngamini [to the SE of Wankanguru] were frequently accused of being expansionist, and there is clear evidence of Western Desert people displacing Lower Southern Aranda to the west of Oodnadatta.

But this latest colonial interaction ramped up the experience, and the stakes, of inter-group interaction to a new, even higher order of intensity. A division between the generations opened up; between those born into the ferment, and those already adult who had to find other ways of dealing with it. This highlights the non-unitary impact of changes – they had different effects for different people, ages, genders. Differences in experience are then a source of cultural transformation – children experience the changes differently from adults, and use that experience in novel ways.

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63 Rose 1999: 9.
65 Elkin 1939/40: 196-198. He writes: ‘Just as the Dieri have a tradition of being pushed south to their present location by the Wongkonguru, and as, according to one of my Aluridja informants, the Aluridja people moving south, displaced a portion of the Arabana tribe from the Oodnadatta district, so in between these two movements of peoples, the Aranda spread down the Finke south of Horseshoe bend and Charlotte Waters and so across into South Australia. Their movements may even have been a contributory cause of the southern migrations of the Wongkonguru and Aluridja, their eastern and western neighbours respectively.’
Pilfering and stand offs
Imagine the adults watching the same construction activities, discussing the possible explanations for them amongst themselves, and testing their ideas by coming closer to the camp. Giles gives his account of their reactions:

At first we saw but little of the natives, although we had good reason to know that they saw a great deal of us. Axes began to disappear … and the men’s clothing hung out on bushes to dry, near the camps, would be missing in the morning. … saw traces of the missing axes - I frequently found the natives had been there before us, cutting down saplings with our own axes, to make weapons with. …

There is righteous indignation here about goods being stolen, especially when they were all selected to be ‘of the best materials and kind’ and personally packed in Adelaide, in limited supply, essential for the success of their project, and value-added by their laborious transportation. This is mixed with a weary tone of expectation that this would inevitably happen, a part of the assumption of the self-evident attraction of what are assumed to be superior western goods. This view takes the properties of artefacts and introduced items as self-evident: it is assumed the advantages of new items were immediately manifest to natives. Food was not self-evidently valuable; tobacco rapidly was, as discussed above. Certainly metal axes were immediately sought after because of their utility and value. They were not ‘spare’, however, having a high use-value for the construction party, with no extras having been provided for trading. So they were not offered voluntarily, and were taken. At Port Jackson, local Aboriginal people similarly removed metal items in particular - axes, spades, knives and hatchets from huts and tents.

Giles also describes the removal and reinterpretation of the construction team’s clothes in the Finke River channel, where he discovered a ‘native granary’ consisting of:

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67 Giles 1896 3(6): 44.
68 Giles 1894 Vol 2(9).
71 See Jones 2007a: 112-129. Alfred Giles describes an Aboriginal man’s first reaction of ‘astonishment and wonder’ and eagerness to seeing the way a metal axe cut through a branch, north of Charlotte Waters in 1870 (1926[1995]: 29).
bags of different kinds of grain, stored up for the winter, or rather the dry season. The bags were of various sizes, and consisted of the legs of our trousers and the sleeves of our shirts, tied up at each end, and filled with seeds. This was too much for the patience of my men, who were for forthwith confiscating the whole lot. But I would not allow this, nor permit anything to be removed …

Here we have an insight into the unstable identity of objects and their value in cross-cultural exchanges. The uses to which things were put is not inscribed in them, an object is not necessarily the same thing in a different context. Their ‘value’ depends on cultural knowledge. To say what was given ‘does not tell us what was received’. Here, the recognition of the utility of a tube of finely woven fabric for holding grain is a re-definition of its function, clothing per se not being of any value.

As in the initial exchanges of bread, in this ‘pilfering’ of valued items, is enacted a disparity of values, and a mis-match of expectation of appropriate actions to match the attributed values. As Nicolas Thomas says:

> Evaluations of particular artifacts will often conflict: a situation of exchange, or one in which one party attempts to impose exchange upon another, is thus inevitably a politicized field entailing compromise, subordination, acquiescence, refusals and so on. In cross-cultural exchange on colonial peripheries, in particular, the discrepancies between estimations of value are one of the crucial sources of conflict.

**Changes in raw material use**

More broadly, the array of new materials of metal, glass, ceramic and fabric were incorporated into existing forms of use for containers, as cutting or digging implements or as the raw material for flaking artefacts. In 1901 Gillen, at Tennant Creek wrote:

> In a very few years the stone weapons of these central tribes will be a thing of the past and I am afraid we shall contribute very largely to their extinction by distribution of iron tomahawks and knives.

It is not at all an easy matter to get hold of stone implements even here … Old knife blades, pieces of scrap iron, shear blades and even telegraph wire are being used instead of stone by the natives who

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73 Giles 1896 3(6): 44.
75 Thomas 1991: 108.
77 Gillen Camp Jottings July 29 1901 [1968: 186].
also make use of glass bottles for manufacturing spear heads, they
chip the glass beautifully but it is too brittle to be of much service.\textsuperscript{78}

Stirling\textsuperscript{79} reported that the telegraph insulators were used for ‘the manufacture
of beautifully made spear heads’. On the ground surface surrounding the
telegraph station at Charlotte Waters I recorded flaked white ceramic pieces
that appear to be made from the telegraph insulators, although they could have
been worked at any time since, not necessarily when the insulators were in
active use (fig 3.3, 3.4, 3.5). I also recorded flaked glass artefacts, particularly the
bases of bottles, throughout the background scatter of stone artefacts on the
surface of the ground at Charlotte Waters (fig 3.6, 3.7). Glass bottles make
excellent scrapers for shaping wood and continue to be used in the same way in
contemporary times: in 1996 when I visited Bingey’s house in Finke, I found
him and Harry Taylor on the verandah smoothing a wooden branch with a
glass scraper to make an artefact for sale in the shop.\textsuperscript{80}

New materials do not just replace old ones for the same purpose, but have the
capacity to transform the way in which old materials are regarded and used.
Stone artifact production is not simply replaced by new materials that enter the
production system, the system continues in a way that has been reset by the
new materials. Not all stone working was pre-colonial. Archaeologists Graham
and Thorley have proposed that the traditional production of powerful,
ceremonial large \textit{lelira} stone blades was accelerated to feed into an intensified
pattern of trade distribution.\textsuperscript{81} They make the intriguing suggestion that the
Overland Telegraph Line offered a corridor for freer movement with less
friction with other language groups, and made possible longer range and
greater rates of mobility amongst Indigenous people, which in turn made
possible larger gatherings of people. They go on to suggest that this enabled the
increased spread of the existing trade networks and increased demand within
those networks for introduced goods. They argue that this was a driver for
accelerated rate of production and range of distribution of the valuable large

\textsuperscript{78} Gillen \textit{Camp Jottings} August 3 1901 [1968: 194].
\textsuperscript{79} Stirling 1896: 95.
\textsuperscript{80} Macfarlane field notebook 7 July 1996.
\textsuperscript{81} Graham and Thorley 1996.
lelira stone blades. These were exchanged together with the introduced materials.

**Violence, twice recounted**
The Charlotte Waters telegraph station had been under construction for 14 weeks. The majority of the team working on it went north to continue building the line. Giles writes that ‘‘War’’ was declared and hostilities commenced on 18 April 1871. For the first time the local people brought their weapons into camp. The past months had been full of watchful wariness on both sides. Now the white incomers read the locals’ taking axes and a tarpaulin as treachery. On the other side, the builders had failed to meet any of the requirements of strangers’ etiquette, and were out-staying their welcome. Frustration was notched up to the point of physical violence when the base camp was left under the watch of only two of the white men.

Two accounts of the events that followed are given by the overseer of this part of the line, surveyor Randall R. Knuckey. He was a key participant in the interaction. The first of his accounts was taken from his own journal from the time and published 24 years later by Giles. The second is an alternative written account, published 43 years later. The degree of detail included in the accounts is one of their characteristics, with every move and counter-move narrated in an immediate style of reportage. At the same time, the detail differs. The first account downplays the force involved, the second emphasises the recall of the events by an Indigenous combatant. For this reason, in order to give the texture of the accounts as much as the sequence of events, I quote them at length.

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82 Giles 1895 Vol 3(6): 45.
Fig 3.3: Abandoned ceramic insulator on the ground surface, near the waterhole, Charlotte Waters, recorded July 1996

Fig 3.4: Flaked insulator ceramic on the ground surface, Charlotte Waters, recorded July 1996

Fig 3.5: Flaked insulator ceramic and retouched brown chert flake close together on the ground surface, near the waterhole, Charlotte Waters, recorded July 1996

Fig 3.6: Flaked bottle base Charlotte Waters, recorded October 1997

Fig 3.7: Brown chert retouched artefacts on the ground surface Charlotte Waters
Knuckey’s journal records his view of the action:\textsuperscript{83}

About 300 yards from the store, and having hid their spears, nine of the blacks came up the bank, and began making signs to us to come down. As they did not succeed, they sent two of their number up to us with the intention probably of making us think it was a friendly visit, in order to throw us off our guard; and as there were only three of us in camp, they seem to have thought they would be able to plunder with impunity as soon as night set in. The fact of their having brought their spears, and shields and other weapons with them, induced one to think they meant mischief, as this was the first time they had brought weapons into camp.

I tried to make the two natives understand about the stealing of the tarpaulin. I think they did at last, for they pointed down the creek, and made signs that it was in their camp. We kept a good lookout all day, never allowing any of them to come within 100 yards of the camp, and when the sun had set I motioned them off. They went away and camped about half a mile off. I determined to watch the stores etc and see if any of the natives attempted to steal, as I felt pretty sure they would try it. I gave Davis the first watch, from 8 to 11, about 9 he saw a native creeping up towards them, followed by others at about 50 yards distance. Davis gave a low whistle to apprise me, and this gave the alarm to the natives, who at once scampered off, and I saw no more of them that night.

Wed April 19, 1871 - This am at sunrise the whole lot of natives came up again in a very threatening manner, and drew up about 150 yards from the store.

They commenced a kind of war dance, and then made signs for us to be off and leave the place, or they would spear us. One of them in particular, a savage-looking black, and evidently a chief-man was very demonstrative and [seemed to be] urging his men to attack us. He several times placed his spear in his ‘wommera’ or throwing stick, and shook it at us, at the same time dancing and making an unearthly noise. I got out my rifle, and the men also got their arms in readiness, for we thought every minute they would be upon us. I motioned them to go away, at the same time presenting the rifle to them. They laughed at this, upon which I walked towards them, keeping my rifle in readiness. The chief then shook his spear at me. I once more waved them off, and some of them took the hint, but the chief commenced singing out to them in a loud voice, and stepped out from their midst aiming his spear with the evident intention to throw.

As I thought this had gone on long enough, and being afraid, as we were so few, that we might be overpowered, I reluctantly fired at him; the bullets went very close to him, and hit a small tree near him.

\textsuperscript{83} included verbatim by Giles 1895 (Vol 3(7): 53).

174
This evidently frightened and astonished him and his party, for they 
at once took to their heels and bolted down the creek. About half an 
hour afterwards I saw them again rounding up our horses; I at once 
ran towards them when seeing me come, they made off, setting the 
grass on fire as they went, in order I suppose to prevent us following. 
I hope they will not take to spearing our stock; it is bad enough as it 
is, but if we have to watch the stock likewise, it will place us in a fix. 
I am determined, if they come again, to use no half measures with 
them.

They have had no provocation whatever from us, and no 
encouragement. If we ever came to one of their camps we 
scrupulously avoided taking anything that we saw in it. Evidently 
they are getting accustomed to us, and seeing that we are on our 
guard against thieving, think they can conquer us by force, I hope for 
their sakes that they will not try it on again.

The detail in this account indicates that the local men, having taken the major 
tactical decision that it was going to be necessary to escalate interactions to a 
show of overt defensiveness, bring their shields and spears and clearly signal 
that the incomers are unwelcome and should leave, and give them the 
opportunity to do so. They do not seem to have seen guns in action before at 
this early stage. Knuckey attributes their aggressive display to their desire for 
European goods, not to territorial propriety. Having taken none of their goods 
he feels they have no grounds to feel provoked. We see the local men going 
through a managed, staged succession of actions, reminiscent of Spencer’s 
description of extended protocols for dealing with armed strangers. In these 
there are many gestures and pauses which offer opportunities for appropriate 
response, none of which were picked up by the incomers who viewed it all as a 
stark threat, and responded in kind, arguably underestimating the 
communicative potential of the terms of engagement.

Knuckey’s later written account, as printed by Richards tells a different 
version of this story, one in which the first shot is fired by the local ‘chief’ and 
where neither his spear, nor Knuckey’s returned fire miss.

… just after daylight 20 or 30 of them appeared on the opposite bank 
of the creek with all of their warpaint on. … They were led by an old 
chief who tried his best to make them rush us, but they hung back.

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84 Spencer 1928: 240-245.
85 Richards 1914: 16.
The three of us were armed with revolvers and I had a snider carbine. I walked towards them and made signs of peace; the old chief walked to meet us and when about 80 yards distant he fixedhis spear in the woomera and threw it at me and struck me on the right elbow, so I thought it was my turn then. I fired and hit him in the shoulder. He jumped in the air and they all ran down the creek like a mob of wild goats. The injured black came into the telegraph station subsequently and died about 12 years afterwards.

In 1911, after an absence of forty years, I was again at Charlotte Waters, and when in conversation with the Postmaster (Mr Kearnan) an old blackfellow came up saying he knew me, and told the Postmaster that I had built his wurly (the telegraph station). He also gave a very graphic description of the fight, how I had hit the old chief in the shoulder, and how frightened they were. ... he recognised me at once.

Recall of the events, as reported, is detailed on the part of all participants. These engagements were frightening brinkmanship for both surveyors and locals. Personal safety now rested on the outcomes, and any precedents set would have repercussions in the future. The sequence and form of actions was not forgotten. They were probably retold many times at many get-togethers in the years afterwards. It is telling that the local participants recognised Knuckey as an individual, whereas he gave the generic designation ‘natives’ to his acute observers. Such detailed recall may also indicate an uncommon status for this engagement, rather than both sides living in a continuous condition of threatened violence. There are no records or oral traditions of massacres in this part of the country.

When Charlotte Waters was fully operational, but still new, the young Frank Gillen in May 1875\(^8\) reported that ‘the Police Trooper here informs me that while he was absent a few days ago, the Natives mustered in large numbers, all painted up and fully armed with Spears and Boomerangs as if meditating an attack on the Station, directly they saw him retuning, they dispersed’. This may have simply been a story to frighten a ‘new chum’ to the line, or it may genuinely indicate that such skirmishes continued at least in the early establishment phase of the station.

\(^8\) Gillen 1995: 68.
Movement along the line

As the main artery of travel through central Australia, the track which serviced the Overland Telegraph Line was not only a place where white travelers of various sorts – explorers, stockmen, linesmen, scientific parties, tourists – met each other, but was immediately a linear contact zone for them and the local Indigenous people. For those travelling through, it presented a narrow line of safety and familiarity and they risked getting lost if they left the track. For the Indigenous people of the area, the track which cut through their country can be imagined as a river of wagons, horses, stock and camping people. From their wide network of lines of travel and water places, not bounded by one available route, they would come and go and visit those passing through, checking who was in their country. This started immediately, but remained a part of travel along the line. In 1901, for example, when Spencer and Gillen reach Stevenson’s Creek they camp by a good waterhole. Several drovers passed by with cattle, and then ‘by good luck a few old natives turned up, so we persuaded them to camp nearby ... with the aid of flour and tobacco’ and ‘this gave me the chance of experimenting with our phonograph, ... we managed to get the natives, who were naturally frightened of the machine, to sing near enough to the trumpet to catch their voices’. 87

The raw reminiscences of Allan Breadon, a stockman who drove cattle to newly establishing stations along the line convey a sense of pervasive anxiety and distrust of Aboriginal presence by white travellers in early encounters along the line. In Breadon’s anecdotes are hearty and aggressive, telling tales of one-upmanship. He tells a story of one white stockmen frightening ‘Blacks’ on the Finke by letting off explosives in a tree, and another by using a trick of ventriloquism to throw their voice. He stresses the importance of never being left alone:

I noticed signal smokes rising in different places right down the Macumba as far as I could see. I knew the sign. Something was up with the Blacks and sure enough I was right. ... a man came rushing

87 Spencer 1928: 354-6.
out armed with two revolvers and a rifle and in a great state of mind. He had the wind up properly and could hardly speak. My God he said I am glad you came. … Just before you came eight or 10 Niggers came across the creek all with spears and demanded Flour, Tea and Sugar. Why didn’t you shoot? I was too frightened. I had no cover a spear could come through these bushes anywhere. I said yes but you should have stopped them before they crossed the creek. Oh I didn’t think of that. Well, I told him they would have got you tonight if no one had turned up Flour and All.\(^{58}\)

Three years earlier, in November 1872, when the line had been cutting the landscape for under two years, Ernest Giles\(^{89}\) describes a noteworthy, eventful encounter initiated by an Aboriginal boy on the Finke River to the north of Charlotte Waters. It contains many of the elements that shaped interactions along the line. The unnamed boy came into Giles’ camp and made it clear he wanted to ride Giles’ horse and go south with him. His family and their wider group – dozens of men, women and children – joined them. Giles gives the boy’s father damper. The group camp 100 yards away, but the boy and his brothers camp with Giles. He ‘was not quite sure whether to expect an attack from such a number of natives. I did not feel quite at ease; though these were, so to say, civilized people, they were known to be great thieves; and I never went out of sight of my belongings, as in many cases the more civilized they are, the more villainous they may be.’ In the morning, the boy’s father agrees, using sign language, that he can go south with Ernest Giles, who comments that ‘nearly all the civilized youngsters, and a good many old ones too, like to get work, regular rations, and tobacco, from the cattle or telegraph stations, which of course employ a good many’. He goes on ‘I gave the old fellow some old clothes (Tommy I had already dressed up), also some flour, tea, and sugar’.\(^{90}\) The boy rides off happily with Giles, but the horse bolts, the boy falls off and breaks his arm on ‘stumps of timber cut down for the passage of the telegraph line’.\(^{91}\) Giles goes to retrieve the horses, and returns to find another youth tending to the wounded boy. He too was ‘evidently bound to seek his fortune in London – that is to say, at the Charlotte Waters Station’. There, Giles ‘got the

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\(^{58}\) Breadon 1875: 15.  
\(^{89}\) E. Giles 1889 [1995]: 68-70.  
\(^{90}\) E. Giles 1889 [1995]: 69.  
\(^{91}\) E. Giles 1889 [1995]: 70.
little boy regular meals at the station; but his arm was still bad. I never saw him again’. 92

In this series of approaches and negotiations we can see the intensification of established themes. We can see inter-generational nuances, with the young boys keen for immersion in the new possibilities of horse riding, travel, English words, clothes. The older adults are more wary, but ready to make what they can from the opportunities that have opened, from a bargaining position grounded in their own pre-existing value system. The exchange of everyday goods and rations for services has rapidly found a place in the deployed array of cross-cultural exchanges. The injured boy, like the wounded man shot by Knuckey, ‘comes in’ to the Charlotte Waters telegraph station. An element of dependency enters the range of potential relations, in addition to the possibility of choice.

Labour and rations
Aboriginal labour made a major contribution to the running of the telegraph stations, not just to the cattle stations that rapidly followed the establishment of the line (see chapter 4). Indigenous people provided support for running the telegraph station’s stock, managing horses and domestic tasks. We see glimpses of these roles in the journals of those who traveled along the line. In 1875, on Frank Gillen’s first visit through Charlotte Waters as a young man, he asks Aboriginal women to wash his clothes, and Aboriginal men are responsible for bringing his horses in. 93 Returning in 1901, Spencer visits the waterhole half a mile away to the north of the station where the ‘natives attached to the station’ had ‘built a few little huts out of old boxes and kerosene tins’, which are very hot. 94

These natives are employed as ‘general helps’ at the station. Three of the women take charge of the goats, of which there is a herd numbering about 400. ... invaluable as supplying both milk and meat ... Early in the morning they are taken out, miles away across the plain where they can feed, and at night time are brought back to a fenced yard near the station. 95

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92 E. Giles 1889 [1995]: 70.
93 Gillen 1995: 68.
94 Spencer 1928: 358.
95 Spencer 1928: 358.
In the 1990s, a bough shelter built by the sheep- and goat-herds was still standing near post-and-wire goat yards on the banks of Abminga Creek (fig 3.8, 3.9). Bingey Lowe said ‘many people camp along there. Yes. They had lots sheep there then. People camped with the sheep along there, Aboriginal people’.  

One woman who is described in unusual detail by both Spencer and Gillen as a strong character, was named Charlotte after the station, and was employed as ‘kitchen-maid and assistant to the cook … She is as good-natured as she is stout and can do anything from peeling potatoes, when there are any to peel, to driving a team of bullocks’. She is ‘seldom without a pipe in her mouth’ and ‘has strong views on women’s rights’ (fig 3.10).

In 1913, Aboriginal men ‘Moses’ and ‘Jim’ were assistants to Alexander Ross, then responsible for maintenance of wells and bores along the line. They carted wood and took messages to and from the nearest telegraph stations. They were paid in cash and goods. Ross gives a list of ‘requirements from the Government’:

for ‘a/c paid Wallis and Co. a total of £4/19/6, 1 pr boots, 3 shirts, 1 Handkerchief, 1 hat, 1 glass, 1 belt, tobacco, £7/6 in cash, for Jim - Aboriginal Df [?] (assistant)’.

In 1912, Love mentions that of the 50 or so people camped at Finke Well, 10 miles east of Charlotte Waters, ‘Several of the men do occasional work such as horse tailing for government parties camped at the well, or assisting at the windlass and shovel’.

So while originally built to be defensible against attack from the natives, within at least two years the station was drawing on Indigenous labour, and seems likely to have become a ration distribution centre following the droughts of the 1880s, although there is no direct textual evidence for this until 1891.

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96 Macfarlane field notebook 20 July 1996.
97 Spencer 1928: 358-9; Gillen 1968: 16-17.
98 SLSA PRG 161/6/ Diary of Alexander Ross, 10 February 1913.
Issuing rations is a way of provisioning large numbers of workers from a central source. The South Australian Telegraph Department issued rations for the builders of the Overland Telegraph Line, for example. However, for Indigenous people, rationing was more than this, operating as ‘a pervasive institution of Central Australian colonialism’. Defined as ‘the non-Aboriginal practice of providing food, clothing and other goods (such as blankets and tobacco) to Indigenous people’, it was almost ubiquitous in Central Australia from the 1880s on: ‘few, if any, families were not subject, at some time to one of the regimes of rationing’. In the full range of institutions where Indigenous people interacted with the incomers, be they scientific researchers, pastoralists, missionaries, official government officers or police, – rationing was part of these cross-cultural relations.

The issue of blankets and food to Aboriginal people was established as the major work of the early protectors of Aborigines appointed in the first decades of the South Australian colony as land was taken up in the south. In 1860 there were 12 ration stations in action, but all in the southern districts. By 1887, this had expanded and included the Far North. A handbook of South Australia describes the organisation of the system in operation then:

The protection of the aborigines is provided for by the State. A special department watches over their welfare and interests, consisting of a protector, who has the disbursement of the annual vote, £5/10/4, and the control and supervision (assisted by a sub-protector in the Far North), of the depots (about 50 in number), for the distribution of rations, clothing and medical comforts.

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102 Rowse 1998.
103 Rowse 1998: 5.
104 Gale 1972: 44.
Fig 3.8: Bough shelter at Abminga Creek, recorded July 1996
Fig 3.9: Goat yards Abminga Creek, recorded July 1996

Fig 3.10: Spencer’s 1901 portrait of Charlotte, employed at Charlotte Waters repeater station. Spencer 1928: fig 195 facing p 359
A folio-sized leather-covered ledger that bound together elaborate forms provided for the tabulation of the ‘Cost of stores and other expenses in connection with Aborigines Depot’ at various rations stations throughout South Australia, for the years 1924-1932. Those in the far north include Oodnadatta, Killalpinina, Dalhousie Springs, Mt Dare and Macumba. Charlotte Waters is not listed, as it is then in the Commonwealth Northern Territory.

These forms allow for the documentation of the weight of flour, sugar, tea, rice, tobacco, soap and sago issued, although in the far north rice, soap and sago are not recorded as ever being issued. The forms also have columns to show ‘No. of natives at Depot’ and ‘Births’ and ‘Deaths’, and ‘Remarks’. These columns are only sporadically filled in. Medicines are listed under ‘remarks’. There is also provision on the form for a cornucopia of potential stores that itemizes the basic survival kit of the time: blankets, shirts, dress stuff, tomahawks, netting twine, fish hooks, fishing lines, needles, thread, axes, spoons, quart pots, pannicans. In these far north ration depots, few of these items were ever issued.

For the years 1910-1927 there are less structured forms which just ask for ‘particulars’ to be recorded. There is only one of these filled in for Charlotte Waters, for 1909-1913.

| Cost of Stores and other expenses in connection with Aborigines Depot at Charlotte Waters N.T. for Year ending June 30th 1910 |
|---|---|
| Date | Particulars |
| 1909 | |
| June 21 | Cartage stores AA Bagot |
| Sepr 27 | 280 Sugar 74 Tea 12 Tobacco |
| Oct 18 | 2100 Flour |
| 1911 | |
| Jan 28 | 50 Blankets 1 Case |
| April 18 | 3000 flour |

106 SRSA GRG 52/27.
107 SRSA GRG 52/25.
1910

Sepr 22   280 Sugar 58 Tea 15 Tobacco
          2100 Flour

Dec 8   280 Sugar 58 Tea 15 Tobacco

1911

Feb 3   2100 flour

Station transferred to Northern Territory 1.1.11

October 10   56 Tea

March 12   12 Blue serge shirts

"   7   Stores etc

"   6   "

1912-13

October 11   1380 lbs Sugar 2 Bags
        4050 lbs Flour

24 1 lb Volatile Sal 1 lb Camphore Co. P.B. Bottles 8 Case 6

Nov 8   2 lb Eucalyptus Bottle 6, 28 lbs Tobacco, 1 case 6

Northern Territory Commonwealth

We have a snapshot of the arrangements at Charlotte Waters in 1925, then a Post Office. The staff consisted of a Postmaster, a linesman and a laborer. The Postmaster, in addition to postal and telegraph business and meteorological duties, had to

supervise the work of the linesman and the blackboys, the latter are employed for shepherding the Departmental stock, which are yarded each night, distribute Government rations to the natives who number approximately 60 ... [and] prepare meals for the blackboys, thus conserving rations ... 109

What rations were issued prior to 1909 at Charlotte Waters is unknown, with the only other specific listing of particulars for Charlotte Waters given in the Aboriginal Office Parliamentary Papers for 1891, listing the ‘number of natives receiving rations’ from MC Daer as 14, and the ‘number of natives in the district’ as 46. The rations given are not itemized. 110 In 1912, James Love says

109 AA 659 1944/1/2894 24 June 1925 Memorandum to the Secretary, Postmaster-General’s Department, Melbourne, p 3.
110 SAPP No 93 1891.
that ‘government rations are distributed at Charlotte Waters while the blacks
supplement these by hunting for such lizards and birds as they can catch’. In 1920, Herbert Basedow praised the postmaster Mr HH Peek and Mr P Byrne
‘who do much in a private capacity to better the misery of the locally resident
groups’. One obvious source of their misery was minimal rations in
combination with a lack of any other source of food, as even rabbits were scarce
after successive droughts. There were 40 aged people and six women with
‘about a dozen’ children resident at Charlotte Waters at the time. Basedow
itemizes the rations issued during 1920 in detail, presumably having asked the
post master for information directly:

- Blankets 50
- Galatea 50 yards
- Flour nearly 2 tons
- Sugar 600lbs
- Rice 112 lbs
- Thread 1 lb
- Pannicans 24
- Shirts 24
- Tea 110 lbs
- Clay-pipes 1 gross
- Eucalyptus 2 lbs
- Epsom salts 3 lbs
- Eye water 12 bottles
- Cough mixture 12 bottles
- Soap 112 lbs

The weekly rations distributed amount to only 4 lbs of flour per head
and enough tea leaves and sugar to make two quart-pots of tea. Many of the natives have now left Charlotte Waters and gone to New
Crown Point where they can obtain more to eat both at the Point and
in the adjoining sandhills.

On most of the stations ‘Killing day’ brings a windfall to the
aborigines who come from miles around to receive the head, the gut,
the pluck, the bones and often pieces of carcase [sic] which the
proprietors as a rule present to them.

The medicines issued reflect the many chest infections and eye disorders that
were prevalent. Basedow also says ‘Both Syphilus and Gonorrhoea are

111 SLSA PRG 214 Series 6: 25.
112 AA CRS A3 item 22/2805 Report on the third medical relief expedition among the
unfortunately much in evidence along the Overland Track, adding to the misery.

The basic goods involved in the economy of rations were iconic items of colonial trade – sugar, tea, tobacco. Only the flour was produced in Australia, probably in South Australia. The means of production is detached from the site of consumption, there is no control by the recipients over what comes in, and little by the local distributors, who are forced to send pleas for extra supplies. The terms of exchange have become highly unbalanced with respect to the ownership of and access to resources. Only 25 years after bread was being rejected as unpalatable or unacceptable for exchange, these resources were being turned into the substrate for Indigenous life on the western Simpson Desert. This edge of the desert was being established as one the extremities of colonial market forces, and the Aboriginal population were inexorably being implicated in the global market economy.

We have a rough indication of the amounts that were issued in 1929. They work out at approximately 1.0-0.55lb flour, 0.13-0.25lb tea and 2.0-0.5lb sugar per week per person. As Heather Goodall says about the NSW rationing system, these rations provided ‘by no means enough to feed the group, but enough to ensure their continued presence’, which was needed for labour. Historian Robert Foster shows that the South Australian pastoral stations that issued government rations were effectively having the cost of their labour subsidised, while those who did not had to provide them from their own supplies, or risk losing their workforce.

113 AA CRS A3 item 22/2805 1921: 32-33.
114 For example, in ration records GRG 52/26/2:
To Chief Protector of Aborigines
Sir In view of this depot now supplying rations to 36 Aborigines I respectfully ask that larger supplies of Flour, Sugar, and Tea to be sent. Approximate rations to be issued for month = 600lbs (4 bags) of flour, 19 lbs tea, 75 lb sugar (over 1 bag), I am Sir, Your Obedient Servant, EJ Williams
Flour required as soon as possible. Rec’d 15 Dec 1929

115 This calculation is based on the enumerated request in footnote 3 and the memoranda [AA Series A1 Item 31/1718].
117 Foster 2000: 12.
There is a moral emphasis on ‘the able bodied’ providing for themselves. This was in direct contradiction to the evidence that the condition of the country was changing so as to make it increasingly difficult to find sufficient food. Rabbits and cattle were in competition with native animals for feed, the waterholes were degraded by cattle and the local ecology disrupted. The land holder at Dalhousie Springs, John Lewis, reported to the Pastoral Lands Commission in 1898 that the condition of the land in the area was ‘cronk’ - overstocked, and eaten out by rabbits ‘the only pest we have to fear’, and Spencer reports that in 1923 rabbits were present there ‘in 100s, and to judge by the results of collecting, had almost completely exterminated not only the smaller marsupials, such as the rabbit-bandicoot but also the jerboa rats’ which were important in the diet. The rabbits could of course be eaten. But within 20 years of the Overland Telegraph Line being established, the local Indigenous people’s choices of food were already far less discretionary, with less diversity and less volume available. When this was combined with the effects of drought, having to ‘come in’ for rations became a necessary mainstay.

There were general pleas for more rations for the indigent, the old and infirm and children, and also for additional or continued support when there was a drought, as in the 1880s, 1890s and 1930s. There are also appeals to justice, for due recompense for the labour provided by Aboriginal people in general. For example, Frank Gillen, in his evidence given to the Pastoral Lands Commission 1891 said:

Have the natives in your opinion rendered material assistance to the squatters in this outside country? – ‘Yes; I do not know what they could have done without them.’
Are you of the opinion that the provision made for the Aborigines is equivalent to the service they have rendered to the squatters and the country? – ‘I think that the squatters have given them enough to eat, but have not always treated them as well as they should have done. I also think that the government should provide rations for the old

118 Rowse 1998; Foster 2000.
119 SAPP No 77: 250.
120 Spencer 1928: 562 footnote.
121 eg Lennon and Madigan 2000: 14-5. There were ‘vast amounts’ of rabbit bones at the Murraburt mikiri well, the one nearest Dalhousie Springs, accumulated by people re-visiting after 1900 (Hercus 1987: 68).
and infirm natives who are not able to work all along the telegraph line. A number of them are in a chronic state of starvation.122

Each person in employment would in turn be passing on food and supplies to family members, supporting at least five others outside in the camp with their rations. For example, Love describes this down-the-line support as he observes it at the ‘Black’s camp’ at Idracowra cattle station, further north (200km south of Alice Springs). It contained about 30 people of all ages, most thin and poorly fed. No government rations are distributed here, and to walk to the nearest ration depot is for the old and infirm out of the question. Several lubras are employed in the kitchen, and in their turn, feed about half a dozen others. The station employs about five ‘boys’ who feed a fair number of relatives. The remaining blacks depend on the bones of the beef killed on the station, occasional generous gifts of flour, tea and tobacco from the station and their own hunting. As they are strictly controlled in their hunting, being permitted to hunt only in certain directions, it will be seen that their life is not an easy one, game being of poor quality chiefly lizards and birds with various plants having edible roots, leaves or seeds. Of course the station must restrict the hunting, or the blacks would spear the cattle.123

There was a long-running anxiety about who was a deserving or legitimate recipient of rations. The administrators are clear that the able-bodied should support themselves. Between 1929 and 1931 the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs engaged in a series of memoranda in pursuit of standardization of the weekly ration allowance to Aboriginals in Northern and Central Australia. The latter included the ration issue by the Protectors of Aboriginals at Charlotte Waters.124 This correspondence gives a clear outline of the government aims and ethos with regard to rationing, and of the amounts of rations involved. The South Australian government’s Aboriginal Department form was used as the basic guide for establishing what these should be (see box below).

123 Love 1912: 25.
124 AA Series A1 Item 31/1718.
Instructions to Issuers of stores at the
______________ Aboriginal Depot

Aboriginals’ Department,

Adelaide, __________ _ [date]

1. Rations to be issued regularly — only to the sick, the old and infirm, orphan children, and women with infants under twelve months. All healthy and able Aboriginals should be encouraged, as far as possible, to provide for their own and the wants of their families; but occasional supplies may be given to the able-bodied Aboriginals when there is reason to believe that they are in want, and unable to obtain employment or procure their natural food — in every case the reason to be entered in the column “Remarks”.

2. The rations or weekly allowance to each person receiving relief, not to exceed —
   Flour  7 lbs.
   Sugar  2 lbs.
   Tea    1/4 lb.

To be entered in Monthly return

Rice or sago, as medical comforts, may be substituted for the flour.

Tobacco is not to be considered a regular ration, but is given as follows, at the discretion of the Issuer, as a comfort for the aged and infirm. Aged and infirm men 2 sticks weekly, and women one stick weekly.

3. The usual medical comforts may be issued when required, and also such other articles as may be certified by a qualified Medical Practitioner, or a Justice of the Peace, to be absolutely necessary, the accounts for which are to be certified by the Issuer and forwarded to this Office.

The Issuer, when distributing Stores, should
caution aboriginals against selling or bartering their clothes, &c., for intoxicating liquors.

The Monthly Return of ‘Receipts’ and ‘issues’, ‘Births and Deaths’, &c., to be regularly kept according to the forms transmitted, and forwarded direct to this Office not later than the seventh of each month. Any circumstances which may be thought worthy of mention — such as, whether the Aboriginals are employed by settlers, to what extent, and for what wages; whether there have been any disturbances, &c. — should be entered in the column ‘Remarks’.

Receipts for Stores to be forwarded direct to this Office, as soon as possible after the arrival and inspection of the goods.

All returns to be signed and dated

Care should be taken to make requisitions for fresh supplies in sufficient time to secure their dispatch and arrival at depot, prior to the stock on hand being exhausted.

Chief Protector of Aboriginals

This form was copied for use in Central and Northern Australia, but the amounts were reduced to 5 lbs flour and 1 lb sugar, and the proviso that:

‘4. A monthly return must be forwarded to the Chief Protector of Aboriginals showing stores on hand and total issues for the month. This return must be supported by a statement showing the name of each Aboriginal who has been issued with rations, together with the quantity issued during the month to each person. Where rations have been issued to able bodied natives, special mention of the reason for such issue should be included in the monthly returns.’

Such records were not kept – the archived South Australian records rarely have any entry in the ‘remarks’ column.

125 AA Series A1 Item 31/1718.
126 AA A1 31/1718.
As rations became more and more part of the basic food supply, they bound the people receiving them more and more into patterns of contact with the stations and the white workers there. However, the inevitable sexual interactions are not overtly mentioned by anyone. There is one mention of a person of mixed descent in camps, made by Reverend Love. At the Finke Well camp he says: ‘I saw only one half-caste in this camp, a woman of about 30 years’. 127

But there were few white women in the area,128 and short or long-term relations with Aboriginal women can be assumed to have followed patterns described elsewhere. As Ann McGrath says: ‘Aboriginal women’s availability, their willingness to perform arduous work, and the advantage of using them in the dual roles of worker and sexual partner made them an extremely valuable asset for white men’.129

William Henry Willshire was characteristically outspoken and blunt, with a degree of bravado, when he broke the discursive silence around this topic to speculate in 1896 of the early frontier that ‘men would not remain so many years in a country like this if there were no women and perhaps the Almighty meant them for use as He has placed them where ever the pioneers go’. ‘What I am speaking about is only natural especially for men who are isolated … where women of all ages and sizes are running at large’.130

A softer ‘insider’ view is that of Fred Ah Chee:131

It was the Aboriginal women who did all the washing, all the housework, and this is where the part coloured originated. … a lot of them were contractors and well sinkers, that type of thing … Ninety percent had Aboriginal wives. A lot of them did marry their wives. A lot wanted someone to live with them and bring their children up.

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127 Love 1912: 25.
128 For example, in 1894 when the Horn expedition travelled north in the area of the Overland Telegraph Line, there were only three adult white women in the 1000 miles between Oodnadatta and Pine Creek: Mrs Ross at Crown Point, Mrs Gillen at Alice Springs, and Mrs Kell at Powell Creek. By 1901 there were still only nine white women in Alice Springs (Mulvaney 2000: 5).
129 McGrath 1987: 68.
131 An Arabana/Wangkangurru/Chinese man, 1927-1987, based in Oodnadatta at the time of Shaw’s interview in 1986.
They needed someone to cook for them and naturally they brought children to that person. You can’t knock it but its just the situation: … and there were ones that just moved on.\textsuperscript{132}

Aboriginal workers may have been increasingly constrained to stay in one place, but they were not provided with housing by their white bosses in exchange for their services. Spencer’s dismal descriptions in 1901 of huts near Charlotte Waters, built from flattened kerosene tins by the ‘the natives attached to the station’ where ‘the heat and smell inside these was overpowering’\textsuperscript{133} was an enduring standard, as there are pictures of a camp near Charlotte Waters in 1927 made of canvas draped on boughs and metal sheets propped against eucalypt branches, with metal boxes for stores.\textsuperscript{134} Gillen’s 1901 photograph of one of these structures (discussed in chapter 1) is his only photograph of a non-traditional Indigenous subject at Charlotte Waters (fig 1.15).

Archaeological surface remains of two, possibly three circles of stones 2 - 2.5 m in diameter indicate the location of round hut bases, where the stones would have supported the struts of a bough shelter (fig 3.11).\textsuperscript{135} They are on the flats closer to the waterhole, out of direct line of sight of the station buildings. Love describes such bough shelters at Finke Well, ‘made of green gum boughs leaning against each other, forming a protection against the sun but not against the rain’;\textsuperscript{136} a cooler choice of shelter when there were enough trees available.

Charlotte Waters was thus a formal, official place, being used in unofficial ways. The Indigenous people ‘poached’ from the proper spaces the telegraph station’s establishment imposed, and used them in their own way, clandestinely, without ever directly challenging the formal organisation.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{132} Shaw 1995: 59.
\textsuperscript{133} Spencer 1928: 358.
\textsuperscript{135} Macfarlane field notebook 26 October 1997.
\textsuperscript{136} Love 1912: 25.
\textsuperscript{137} de Certeau 1984: xii-xiv, 31.
Spatial distinctions

The main point that emerges from these patchy descriptions of living arrangements is the spatial distinctions that are being set up, with Aboriginal people basing themselves in clusters at varying removes from the telegraph station, and actively coming and going from these into the surrounding country, between the Coglin, the Finke, the Abminga and the Stevenson Creeks, and into the ration station and centres for work at Dalhousie Springs and Charlotte Waters, and further up and down the telegraph line.

But more vital than these basic forms of life-support, Aboriginal people’s labour gave them a firmer purchase in their own land, a way of staying where they wanted to be, and of moving to where they needed to be to keep their relations to country and kin active. In this way they maintained both social and material support. Ann McGrath describes a similar convergence in established Northern Territory station communities where ‘kin and country were both close, providing a positive sense of self-identity often sanctioned and recognised by ritual’. This congruence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interest allowed, or encouraged, co-residency.

Importantly, in northern South Australia there was not the Northern Territory’s discontinuous wet and dry season pattern of labouring on a station and moving off for ceremonial and social life on ‘holiday’ or ‘spells’ when the rains made it impossible to work the cattle. In northern South Australia, the rains were not seasonal and the rounds of pastoral work went on throughout the year, over a wide range of country. However, visits to country, teaching and ceremony could be incorporated into the full pattern of station work as it was carried out.

138 Heather Goodall describes a similar system in the NSW pastoral districts (1996: 61-2).
139 McGrath 1987: 168.
Fig 3.11: Hut bases north of Charlotte Waters near Coglins Creek waterhole, recorded October 1997
PART III New alignments: recording and representations at Charlotte Waters

In the previous section I outlined the changing forms of interactions between Indigenous people and the incomers around what was now well established as Charlotte Waters repeater station. I now move to 30 March 1901, the day of the first Federal election.

Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen arrive at the telegraph station on a horse-cart full of collecting bottles, cameras, notebooks and state-of-the-art moving film and sound recording equipment. Baldwin Spencer, Oxford biologist and Professor of Biology at Melbourne University, had been firmly converted to the task of ethnology by his meeting with Frank Gillen, telegraph officer at Alice Springs, when he was on the Horn Expedition in 1894. They were commencing their year-long anthropological research trek along the length of the Overland Telegraph Line from Oodnadatta to Borraloosa.

Their ethnographic recording work at Charlotte Waters is a particularly significant episode in the history of interaction. On the surface there is an exchange of standard trade goods for intangible knowledge. However, the lack of shared perception of what was being undertaken by the two parties – the recorders and recorded – gives this encounter an enduringly rough edge.

Nine days after leaving Oodnadatta, Spencer describes arriving at Charlotte Waters in the heat, with a mirage creating ‘what appeared to be a great shimmering lake with the little station buildings glorified into almost a mystic city, hanging in the air, and a line of huge poles and lofty trees’.141 They stayed in the telegraph station with ‘Pado’ Byrne, the resident telegraph officer and their friend, at what was their ‘Camp No 9’ from 28 March to 9 April 1901.142 It

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141 Spencer 1928: 357.
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was a familiar place to them both, as Gillen had lived at Charlotte Waters as a telegraph officer for 12 years, and Spencer had been there for research during the Horn Expedition in 1894, and again for three weeks in 1895.

They enjoyed being in each others’ company and in central Australia together, and they relished the ethnographic material that they were ‘getting’. They had already published the classic, internationally influential anthropological monograph *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* in 1899, based on their three months recording at Alice Springs in 1897. The extension of that research, in their commitment to a whole year of comparative study of the different language groups along the telegraph line, was a major undertaking. With it they helped pioneer many of the techniques of modern anthropological fieldwork. Their stated goal was ‘detailed accounts of the habits, manners and customs of the native tribes inhabiting the central and northern central parts of Australia, and of the main features in regard to the natural history of the same area’. Their business was detailed recording. They were assiduous note takers. They also took great pleasure in skilled photography and were innovative in their integration of images in the documentation of the ceremonies they describe in their published work. Spencer was also a skilful draftsman, ‘always fond of using his pencil’ who completed a course at art school after leaving school. Gillen was no mean draftsman himself (fig 3.12a, b). Spencer and Gillen had one set of field books for their ethnological observations, and another for personal accounts that they kept for their far-away children. These are written with an eye for amusement and instruction, and illustrated with portraits, biological specimens, ethnographic objects. Spencer also drew scenic views. These are drawings of being there, rather than ‘scientific’ and remote (eg fig 2.25, 3.10, 3.13).

When they arrived at Charlotte Waters, Byrne ‘sent out’ for Aboriginal people to come in from the surrounding area for Spencer and Gillen to work with:

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144 Morphy 1997.
145 Spencer 1912: 5.
146 Peterson 2006: 15; Morphy 1997: 45.
‘Very few blacks here Pado sending out messengers to summon them in’. In his diary Spencer says

April 1 the natives are gradually coming in ... they have promised to give us a corroboree tomorrow so that I will have the chance of using the cinematograph for the first time’ April 2 ‘The natives came in bringing some special sticks like huge bull-roarers from a place about 25 miles off. They are now decorating them with designs in red ochre and charcoal and white clay in a quiet spot down by the waterhole so that the women cannot see them. They are going to perform tomorrow.’

In the published version of these events, Spencer says that there was ‘a native camp out in the scrub, about a mile away from the station containing some thirty or forty men and women, who had come in to perform a rain ceremony’. Here his published retrospective elides the mechanics of arranging ethnographic record-making, giving the initiative to the Aboriginal people, presumably to maintain an impression of an unmediated flow of the ceremony for his readership. In the official census taken at the time, police trooper Cowle ‘mustered and counted natives total 45 including only 4 children’ in the area; presumably the same group of people plus some of those already resident at Charlotte Waters. The children that Christopher Giles saw in 1870 were mature adults now. Spencer and Gillen would have talked to them, but mainly worked with adults who were a little older, born well prior to the line.

During the next 12 days Spencer and Gillen recorded ceremonies and collected ethnographic and natural history specimens. The collections and recordings and the work of processing them filled the telegraph station. Gillen wrote: ‘Pado is a long suffering creature we have taken complete possession of his house and our photographic work has produced a scene of chaos on the premises which would drive an ordinary man to drink … but Pado assured me that he would rather have our mess than our absence’.

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150 Spencer 1928: 359.
151 Gillen 1968: 23.
152 Gillen 1968: 22.
Fig 3.12a: Gillen’s sketch in camp, Spencer and Chance mending their socks. *Camp Jottings* 1968: illustration No. 81 opposite p 302. ‘… there is always something to do in camp and an hour of this afternoon is spent in making some much needed repairs to our socks or rather what is left of them. … if only all Bachelors were forced to mend their own socks there would be more marriage …’ *Camp Jottings* 1968: 302-3, 21 October 1901
Fig 3.12b: Gillen's sketch of girl in profile, *Camp Jottings* 1968: illustration No 39 opposite p 159. This is but one example of many such portraits in Gillen's journal.

Fig 3.13: ‘Our boys watch their billies boil’ Spencer's sketch 1928: fig 193 facing p 351.
The natural history specimens were brought in by the Aboriginal people, especially the women. Marsupials and lizards, water-storing frogs, beetles and an edible tuber ‘called Ilya-Kamana – probably a fungus – very palatable’ were presented. On the 1895 visit Spencer itemises the rate of exchange for the specimens brought in: a pen knife for valuable, rarer animals; a half stick of tobacco for a common one; a pipe plus flour and tobacco, and sweets for all the children for a ‘new’ or rare marsupial such as the pig-footed bandicoot, an echidna, or a Dasyuroides byrneii.

In the same way ‘type specimens’ of material culture were obtained. The elaborate head-sticks used in the Rain ceremony were acquired ‘in return for a bag of flour and some tea sugar and tobacco’. Following the recommendations of AC Haddon, they used not only still photography and field notes for their records, but pioneered state-of-the-art field ethnographic recording. They ‘[a]rranged with the blacks to do some corroborees in a day or two we undertaking to find them in food. We are most anxious to procure kinematographic records before leaving here’. Spencer gives a vivid description of the practicalities of this:

A diagram showed how to fix the film in the machine ... but no instructions had been sent out as to what rate to turn the handle, so I had to make a guess at this. ... when the performers came on the ground I was ready for them, and started grinding away as steadily as I could at the handle ... The chief difficulty was that the performers every now and then ran off the ground into the surrounding scrub...

This was, as Spencer claimed, the first use of film for ethnographic recording in Australia. If awkward, it was a serious, expensive undertaking made in difficult field conditions. With these various methods, they recorded a Rain ceremony, a Kangaroo ceremony, a Snake ceremony and a ‘lubras’ coroboree’. 

157 Gillen 1968: 16.
158 Spencer 1928: 359-60.
159 Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 359-60.
They make the important distinction between what are ordinary ‘open’ ceremonies and those that are secret-sacred and restricted ceremonies.

With the phonograph and wax cylinders they made sound recordings of songs, men and women’s (staged) quarrels, a series of local place names and a wide selection of language sample sentences in Lower Southern Arrernte. These give a vivid sense of the immediacy of the exchanges, and makes the people involved close and real. Spencer’s choice of illustrative sentences, for example on Cylinder No. 12 of the 23 below, casts a strong light on the spectrum of concerns that they were sharing:

Cylinder 12. Spencer introduces the recording: ‘Ceremonies of the Arunta tribe by men who are dancing round the performers’. Written notes with the cylinder say ‘special exclamations used at sacred ceremonials by men dancing round the performers’. Then Spencer announces a series of sentences, which are then restated by a man in Lower Southern Arrernte.

Spencer says: ‘The emu will soon lay eggs’.
‘The Dalhousie blacks are making rain today and the creek will run tomorrow.’
‘The wild ducks are laying eggs.’
‘The pelican is too thin to eat.’
‘Fat snakes make us fat, lean snakes make us thin.’
‘My father was a snake in Alcheringa.’
‘I have one wife but no piccaninnies.’
‘I have seen a kurdaicha.’
‘The old men are wise.’
‘The old men are the masters of the young men.’
‘We want you to come and see us again by and by.’

The film and sound records were sent back to Adelaide on wagons, together with photographic glass plates and the cinematograph and the phonograph machines, as they were considered too fragile to travel further. Thus these innovative methods were used at Stevenson Creek and at Charlotte Waters to record local language, songs and ceremonies for the first time. But this specific documentation, so rare in its evocative, vivid, personal detail, became generic in translation. Its specific origins within the sphere of the people of the Charlotte Waters area are lost. The handbill for Spencer’s 7 July 1902 Melbourne Town

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161 AIAS Archive Tape No 9206 ‘Dubbings of Australian Aboriginal recordings on the Edison Concert five inch cylinders, at least those that are repairable.’
Hall lecture ‘on Aboriginal life in Central Australia’ advertised ‘scenes and ceremonies which have been selected as typical of savage life. The various ceremonies will be illustrated by lantern slides, cinematograph views and phonograph records’ and ‘... the ordinary life of the Natives; their dances or Corroborees illustrated by cinematograph views and phonograph records of the Tchichingala Corobboree, as performed by the Arunta tribe’.162 So they came to stand for the iconic ‘Arunta’, who in turn ‘became the best known Australian Aborigines, the type specimen of the “desert nomad”, whose society was interpreted as an unchanged relic from the dawn of the stone age’.163 Spencer was aware of the distinctions between different sub-groups of Arrernte,164 but does not emphasise these.

The details are in the unpublished field notes, but very little of the mass of recorded ceremonies or language samples from Charlotte Waters were published. The Northern Tribes of Central Australia 1904 contained the results of the 1901 journey. There is a reference and photograph of the women’s dance performed for them there given in a general description of an ‘Arunta tribe’ women’s corroboree, with no location specified.165 It is significant that they chose to include this, however, as other ethnographers such as Strehlow did not pay attention to the women’s ceremonies.166 Spencer also refers briefly to the Charlotte Waters Rain ceremony in Across Australia.167

For those who performed for the record, they gained food and tobacco, and no doubt considerable entertainment from acting out the arguments and singing for the phonograph. They were certainly willing participants in the process. In part this may have been due to respect for Gillen and his reputation, stemming from his attempt to prosecute Mounted Constable Willshire for the murder of Aborigines in 1891.168 His status as someone of influence is seen in an incident Gillen records:

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165 Spencer and Gillen 1904: 720-1.
167 Spencer 1912: 200-1.
some half dozen of the leading men interviewed me and requested that I should nominate a man to be Atalunja or head man of the local group. It appears squabbles have arisen since the death of the old Atalunja as to who should be headman and the deputation said that if I definitely nominated a man he would be loyally supported by the rest. I nominated Arlinka otherwise Alick an old man of the rain totem – this is a great rain centre – who appeared to me to have the best right according to their own laws … this is the first time I have acted in the role of king maker! The fact of the blacks calling in my assistance I think points strongly to the decay of their old tribal organization.169

Rather than simply ‘decay’, this move can be seen as a calculated effort to incorporate the alternative power base that Gillen represented into their own structures of authority, drawing the lines of authority through a doubled pedigree.

Their choice to participate in recording activities may also been because it fitted with traditional protocols for younger men (such as Spencer) to provide food to the elders in exchange for teaching.170 Indeed, their teachings of the Alcheringa have continued throughout the twentieth century and into the next, to a wider audience than they could ever have imagined, leading to problems of sanctions and legitimacy of who can learn.

For the elders at the time, there may well have been dignity and kudos derived from being consulted by these external men of authority. Most white people were not interested in their core beliefs and practices; it may have been refreshing and salutary to have their importance acknowledged by men with good credentials such as Gillen, requiring their serious attention in return.

But no matter how willingly and fully they participated, the elders could not have an informed capacity to assess the degree to which their own values, as vested in their language, ceremonies and sacred objects, would be radically transformed. It was a co-production whose terms were very unequal. The process of translation into anthropological and deeply colonial frames transferred their independent authority to that of Spencer. They could not

provide informed consent to that translation. The stories are told by Spencer. He becomes their broker, and we know them only through his and Gillen’s perspectives. Their voices are the ones we register, not those of the nameless, lively, knowledgeable individuals on the tapes. The latter have no way to gauge the magnitude of the exchange to which they have been party. Twelve days of interchange it may have been, but it is an exchange that is still being negotiated now.

This interaction took place three decades after the establishment of the telegraph station on the rise above the Kirri-idningkala waterhole. But, focused on recording traditional ethnographic forms of life, Spencer separated these from the processes of historical change in which they are embedded.

Travelling in the same party with Spencer and Gillen, however, was one person whose active presence ran counter to the dominant framing they generated. He shows up the oversimplification of attempts to separate the ‘traditional’ from the ‘historical’. The choices made by Jim Kite, or Erlikilyika, emphasise the creative responses possible in the field of changes that was the Overland Telegraph Line.

**Why did Erlikilyika draw? – choosing to represent change**

Erlikilyika was a middle aged man when he was employed by Spencer and Gillen in March 1901 as one of two ‘boys’ who would accompany them from Charlotte Waters to Borroloola. The other was Parunda, also a Lower Southern Arrernte man. Both were born near Charlotte Waters and would have been children when the line was new, and so were of the first generation to grow up within that change, and to be actively absorbing it (fig 3.14).

He worked up and down the line in his youth, learning English and Kaytitja, a northern Aboriginal language, taking the opportunities for mobility, and the freedom from the dominance of the old men that came with these rapid colonial changes.\(^{171}\) So we see that he is flexible and capable.

In the employ of Spencer and Gillen, he and Parunda were responsible for finding water, making camp - including shelters and two fires, assisting with food preparation, shooting game, mail collection and packing up, and the arduous task of relocating the horses each morning.\(^{172}\) Gillen describes one camp scene evocatively:

> Chance smokes contemplatively, watching the flames ... Parunda swiftly kneads a monster damper while Erlikilyika [sic] occasionally chips in a word of advice ... Spencer busily plies his facile pencil transferring this scene to his note book. Would that I had his skill.\(^{173}\)

Spencer and Gillen were totally immersed in the hard work of their recordings. In such an environment, where observation, commentary, recording and sketching were the core of each day’s activities, an interest in ‘having a go’ would be both possible, with materials and time being made available in a manner not common at the time, and, to an unknown extent, encouraged. As Andrew Sayers says, not every Aboriginal person with opportunities to do so saw this as an activity worth pursuing.\(^{174}\) Parunda did not. Erlikilyika did.

Erlikilyika was nicknamed ‘the subdued’ by Gillen, who gave everyone on the expedition evocative nicknames. The policeman accompanying them as a general assistant, Chance, was ‘the old geezer’, Spencer ‘the Prof’ and Gillen ‘the Pontiff’. Even the expedition’s horses were named after anthropologists (Fison, Howitt, Fraser, Tylor, Lubbock and Lang).\(^{175}\) ‘The Subdued’ may have been a contrast with Parunda, who is described by Gillen as ‘the gay Parunda’.\(^{176}\) But it may have been his quiet and watchful approach: Erlikilyika was evidently a thoughtful and observant man. Unusually for an Indigenous person of his time, he had the opportunity to represent what he saw in ways that have survived.

After a month travelling together, about half way through the expedition’s work at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station he seems to have expressed interest in Spencer and Gillen’s habitual note-taking and sketching.

\(^{172}\) Gillen 1968.
\(^{173}\) Gillen 1968: 42, April 19.
\(^{174}\) Sayers 1996.
\(^{175}\) Gillen 1968: 10, 12.
\(^{176}\) Gillen 1968: 94.
Gillen offered Erlikilyika the use of two blank, missed pages in his ‘modest record’ the lined note book which he wrote up each night for his family. Erlikilyika went on to fill eleven pages, much to Gillen’s (pretended) chagrin (fig 3.15 - 3.20):\(^{177}\)

> Alas for the modest record. But at last you will find something in the volume true to nature. … I intended ‘the Subdued’ to fill in the skipped pages, he thought I wanted him to fill in the whole book and has spent the whole day industriously trying to do so - it is an example of original drawing by our Australian natives the pictures are not without interest and I have decided to let them stand but in future I shall not entrust this modest record to the tender mercies of my friend Erlickilyika.\(^{178}\)

There is a slippage here, an oscillation in Erlikilyika’s status, with the camp ‘boy’ entering into the role of the ethnographic subject who is ‘natural’.

The ambivalence of Erlikilyika’s role in the expedition increases as the expedition goes further north, outside his own country. Here, with his language and observational skills, he was actively involved in recording the meaning of

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\(^{177}\) Erlikilyika’s drawings appear carefully, even painstakingly, executed, but the images are not stiff: they give a lively, energetic impression of involvement with his subjects and with the act of drawing. He uses single, unelaborated, firm outlines. All the pictures have a background of either hills and/or trees and grassy ground. The ground is shown as an oval drawn around the feet of the animals and people. Smears of ink, in which finger prints can be seen, have been turned into a background infill in one instance. The drawings are circumscribed in terms of the space they occupy on each page - only the first drawing, of a eucalypt, fills the page between the upper and lower margins, the rest are carefully placed well within the borders of the page.

The eleven images depict a wide range of topics, from a eucalypt with a small bird perched in the branches, to the enactment of a ceremony and scenes of hunting. Here action is indicated via the men’s bent knees and arms, or with sloping ground to underline the sense of a chase. Jones (1992:136 footnote 83) suggests that there is a broad consistency of form of depiction of hunting scenes in diverse early Aboriginal works on paper, including that of Namatjira, which he suggests express ‘entrenched aspects of their culture and history’. Sayers (1996: 5) also comments that the hunt and the ceremony are widely shared concerns in Aboriginal artists’ works in media of non-Aboriginal origin. Three of this group of studies are of non-human subjects, a tree, an emu, a wild dog. The remainder are all of Indigenous men who have beards, headbands and various combinations of items of traditional material culture: hair waistbelts, spears, spearthrower, shield, headdresses, body paint, stone knife, decorated poles. All have been given modest loincloths except the first man, who wears a pubic tassel, and the last set of men engaged in a ceremony who have body paint only. The men all have characteristically short legs and short stubby feet. The majority are shown in three quarter face, as is the standing wild dog. This is an unusual angle for a beginner drawer to depict, profile and full face being easier and more common.

\(^{178}\) Gillen 1968: 75-6.
others’ ceremonies, although this was never fully acknowledged by Spencer, as John Mulvaney has shown (2001). Erlikilyika was thus an unacknowledged contributor to the environment in which Spencer and Gillen developed their understandings set out in *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*.

E has entire charge of the Ethnological branch today and is on his own account digging up a Kaitish tradition which he has carefully recorded in paper in his own peculiar fashion tomorrow we will check and record it in the official journal and his original drawing illustrating the tradition will be attached to these pages as an example of native skill.\(^{179}\)

At about this time, at ‘Woodforde Creek June 1st 1901’ Erlikilyika is given a book of his own to draw in, which Gillen intends to give to his sons. Indeed it was retained in the Gillen family until recently, and these pictures have not been published.\(^{180}\) The names of Gillen’s children are inscribed on the front page together with an inscription stating ‘Spencer Gillen Expedition Journal of Erlikilia, known as the “Subdued”’.\(^{181}\)

In these 27 drawings there is a marked elaboration of Erlikilyika’s interest in depicting his everyday circumstances, extending the ethnographic and natural history topics of the first set. There is exact attention to details of the minutiae of camp equipment, of the arrangement of buttons and belts, of the manner of tying a load on a camel. In the representation of these there is not only a pleasure in drawing, but a reinforcement of Erlikilyika’s daily experience as camp assistant. There are portraits of ‘the Prof’ Spencer, and Parunda, making damper and smoking a pipe, as well as natural history studies, and only two with a man in ‘traditional’ dress or in a hunting scene. There are pages where the same picture is re-worked several times, Erlikilyika practicing his representation of a woman and a stockman (fig 3.21 - 3.28).

\(^{179}\) Gillen 1968: 152.

\(^{180}\) Now held in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra Acc No 2001.0026.000.

\(^{181}\) See Appendix 2 Inventory of Erlikilyika’s work - exhibitions and museum collections of carvings and drawings.
Fig 3.15: Erlikilyika’s two drawings in Gillen’s journal. Mortlock Library, Adelaide PRG 54

Fig 3.16: Erlikilyika’s drawing in Gillen’s journal May 11 1901. Mortlock Library, Adelaide PRG 54
Fig 3.17: Erlikilyika’s drawing in Gillen’s journal May 11 1901. Mortlock Library, Adelaide PRG 54

Fig 3.18: Erlikilyika’s drawing in Gillen’s journal May 12 1901. Mortlock Library, Adelaide PRG 54
Fig 3.19: Erlikilyika’s drawing in Gillen’s journal May 12-13 1901. Mortlock Library, Adelaide PRG 54

Fig 3.20: Erlikilyika’s drawing in Gillen’s journal May 13-14 1901. Mortlock Library, Adelaide PRG 54
He shows action sequences or stories – shaking hands, chopping tree, making damper, mending a rail, the standing man being given orders by the seated one. He sketches temporal sequences, like a comic strip: a man in a wurley is shown; in the next picture he has gone to sleep, his fire going out. These action scenes, the whole body portraits, the attention to details of dress and behaviour of stockmen, depiction of Afghan cameleers, of ‘the Prof’ himself, Parunda all are departures from the subjects of Spencer and Gillen’s sketches. He enumerates the intimate detail of his daily life, the material culture of their camp.

There is a third set of 24 botanical drawings attributed to Erlikilyika.\footnote{In the South Australian Museum archives (SAM Acc No AA298).} Their attribution to Jimmy Kite/Erlikilyika is less certain than that for the other two sets of drawings, as it is based principally on notes added to the front cover of the folio in four different handwritings, and the origin of this information is uncertain. They are distinctive relative to the other two sets of drawings in both their format and their content, and, I would argue, in their intention.

John Mulvaney thinks Erlikilyika may have drawn them when he was in Adelaide in 1913, for the South Australian Museum, which is possible.\footnote{Mulvaney 2005.} Philip Jones speculates that this body of drawings may have been produced by Erlikilyika in c.1899 ‘while living near Gillen’s base at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station’.\footnote{Jones 1992: 106-7.} Against this is the absence of any hint from Gillen that he already knew Erlikilyika when they met up with him at Charlotte Waters, as arranged by Pado Byrne. A close examination of the form of the drawings is warranted to see what clues they contain about provenance.

This series of drawings is presented in a scientific mode. There is a single plant form shown on each page. In fourteen of these there are extra studies or details of unattached leaves arrayed around the central plant, in the style of botanical illustrations. There is a caption added to sixteen of the drawings in what is


Fig 3.25: Erlikilyika’s drawing of camp scene with Parunda making damper, no 1, caption: ‘Parunda makes a damper while the Subdued sketches’, Woodforde Creek 1 June 1901. National Museum of Australia, Canberra Acc No 2001.0026.000.

216

Fig 3.27: Erlikilyika’s drawing 27 Caption: ‘Alligator we did not get’. National Museum of Australia, Canberra Acc No 2001.0026.000
Fig 3.28: Erlikilyka’s drawing of man in traditional headdress and waistbelt, in notebook, no 9, Caption: ‘Hunting the wallaby. Hurrah I’m on top’. National Museum of Australia, Canberra Acc No 2001.0026.000.
presumed to be Gillen’s handwriting. These are difficult to transcribe with any certainty. The captions give ‘native names’ and some comments on the location in which the plants occur. There are four broad groupings of the plant forms as depicted which can be discerned: The seven plants labelled ‘germulla’ or ‘gumulla’ are all large leaved, with their leaves growing opposite each other on the stem (Numbers 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 10, 14). The rest have either smaller, more numerous leaves (4, 7, 15, 17 and 20, two of which labelled ‘illumba’); groups of three leaves (13 and 23); are associated with vines (1, 9 and possibly 18). The remainder have other, distinct leaf patterns. The captions thus have some loose connection to some of the depicted plant forms, but it is not clear what they mean.

There is no scale indicated in the drawings. I think it is possible that these are drawings of a series of botanical samples rather than as the title page states a ‘Series of drawings of trees (with native names),’ That is, they appear to be sketches of leafy twigs or small branches rather than of whole trees. The scale of the leaves relative to the stems is then correct, the inclusion of numbers of loose leaves accumulated in the collecting bag is understandable and the straight base of the stalks with which all of the plants are depicted can be taken to be cut stems. This would be consistent with the absence of depictions of background or a ground line, with the exception of No.18, which has a clear ground line drawn in, and No. 7 which has a single line drawn under the plant base. (In other pictures Erlikilyika characteristically indicates the ground as an infilled oval around the feet of the subject).

Not all the drawings are necessarily at the same scale, however. Those in No. 18 and possibly No. 7 with ground lines shown, and those in No.19 may be whole shrubs or trees. But I think that the forms of the remainder of the drawings are more readily understood as representing plants at a small scale.

A plausible explanation for the production of this ‘themed’ series of drawings, with the addition of the captions in Arrernte, and the scientific mode of presentation is to presume that they were drawn in response to a request for a
scientific documentation of plant samples of different species. This was possibly a commission by Gillen. Although plant collecting was less a priority for Gillen and Spencer than zoological and ethnographic collecting, they did undertake to gather samples for other natural scientists. For example:

It is, with us, a season of ‘after rain’ and I feel that for the Credit of the Country I must send you something and I am also trying to raise a rare weed or two for the old savage [ie Prof Ralph Tate, prof of Natural Science Adelaide University]…. - We are getting a very nice collection of plants tog but I am afraid nothing new. My wind is not good enough for climbing the high ranges…I am however anxious to get a good collection from the Mt Gillen Range and with that purpose in view I sent one of my Boys out the other day and instructed him to fill a bag with all sorts of different flowering plants and pretty grasses. He did so and, upon returning, emptied the whole contents of the bag into the horse yard … 185 and;

Am sending the old savage [Tate] a good assortment of plants this mail, all my collection in fact. 186

We can imagine a non-systematic group of plant samples in various bags being presented to the artist (Erlilikilyika or other) for recording in the large folio book, perhaps during Gillen’s time in Alice Springs. An extended time and some considerable undisturbed space would have to have been made available to the artist, given the size of the folio and the number of drawings.

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John Berger points out the deceptive simplicity of drawing. 187 Drawings are a tree, a cloud, yet they simultaneously remain a sheet of paper with lines drawn on it: ‘this is both so obvious and so strange that it is hard to grasp’ says Berger. We can ask then, how do we learn to read such things? especially with no prior experience. What visual references might Erlilikilyika have grown up with that he could have brought to this engagement?

To consider fully what an innovation it is, we need to step back into the more or less traditional context of Erlilikilyika’s childhood experience where he learnt

how the world worked, especially the place of a representative practice in it, where what Bourdieu refers to as ‘the mind born of the world of objects’ was shaped.\textsuperscript{188}

The only other extant drawings from the area are three crayon drawings and tapes made by two Lower Southern Arrernte men at Mt Dare, the station close to Charlotte Waters, with the encouragement of Charles Mountford ‘Wednesday Aug 24th 1938 ‘... I took sheets of brown paper and crayons and set the natives to work making drawings’.\textsuperscript{189} They drew concentric wavy lines, described as ‘marks on chest’, ‘marks on boomerang’, ‘clouds and creek running’, ‘boomerang’, ‘breast woman and girl’, ‘tjuringa used in non-secret ceremony’, ‘alina sun’, ‘boomerang’. They use red, yellow and white lines. These indicate a tradition of decoration of body and object with incised or drawn lines in this area.

There is no rock art known in this area, instead a vast array of powerful places marked by complex arrangements of stones where ceremonies were held, associated with vibrant performance experiences. We know from Spencer and Gillen’s descriptions and the objects in museum collections that the ceremonial items and people’s bodies were elaborately decorated. These ceremonies continued at least into the 1920s, and Erlikilyika would have had that knowledge.

These drawing acts, as part of performances, are made so as to emphasise the co-occurrence of place, song, and people over the finished product. They are necessarily social actions, not purely individual. This is a different context for representation compared to an individual sketching their own images with their own pencil, in their own book, in their own time. There is a qualitative, quantum leap to start drawing figurative, detailed pictures of your own daily life from experience when your prior experience comes from a field of mark-making which is social and ritual in context and purpose.

\textsuperscript{188} Bourdieu 1977: 91.
\textsuperscript{189} SLSA Sheard collection.
Story telling accompanied by drawing pictures in the sand remains a common element in conversations now, and we saw it earlier as part of children’s play. This may be another model available to Erlikilyika in making the transition to personal drawings, as the narrative element that drives those images in the sand can run onto those drawn on paper.

In answer to the big question of why Erlikilyika drew, it would be easy to say that Erlikilyika’s drawings were simply imitative, generated by the example and atmosphere of the year he spent in Spencer and Gillen’s recording world. But the important counter to this easy answer lies in what Erlikilyika did after the telegraph line trek ended.

He kept going.

Spencer and Gillen took the boat back to Melbourne. They thereafter more or less forget the ‘boys’, even though Spencer returned to Charlotte Waters in 1926\textsuperscript{190} at a time when we know Erlikilyika was there, an old man, as documented in a newspaper article.\textsuperscript{191} Spencer gets their names wrong in his publication,\textsuperscript{192} and he makes no mention of Erlikilyika’s works, even though he was by then a patron to Australian art.\textsuperscript{193} The only glance he gives towards such work is his comment regarding production of ‘... various objects, such as sticks with knobs, carved so as to resemble natural objects, are occasionally manufactured by members of some of the very tribes with which we are dealing, who have been in contact with white men, and are even finding their way into museum collections’\textsuperscript{194}. In contrast, Spencer does speak with affection and concern of the men involved in the Engwura ceremony, with whom he spent five months in 1895, when he revisited Alice Springs in 1901.\textsuperscript{195} Gillen mentions Erlikilyika in his letters once after the end of the expedition, a year
later, reminiscing about northern part of journey when horses were lost for days.\textsuperscript{196}

After the ethnological journey was completed, Erlikilyika and Parunda rode from Boroloola back to Charlotte Waters, a long and hazardous journey out of their country. At some point in the next eight years, and I would suggest soon after his return, he started to make relief carvings on small plaques, statuettes, decorated vases, and many forms of pipes (fig 3.29a, b, c, 3.30, 3.31, 3.32. See also fig 3.33). These works are first documented in March 1910, when several examples were taken to Adelaide, exhibited, and the petrology of the stone analysed.\textsuperscript{197} His carvings were next recorded by Reverend Love, during his visit to Charlotte Waters, in March 1913.\textsuperscript{198} In July 1913 Erilikilyika or Jim Kite is pictured surrounded by an array of 26 of his works in an \textit{Adelaide Observer} article (fig 3.33, 3.34).\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{196} Letter 146, 26 Oct 1902 Mulvaney et al 1997: 408.
\textsuperscript{197} Adelaide \textit{Advertiser} 24 March 1910.
\textsuperscript{198} Love 1912-1914: 24. See Appendix 2.
\textsuperscript{199} Adelaide \textit{Observer} Saturday 26 July 1913: 36, 50. Many of the works taken for exhibition in Adelaide are described and interpreted by Jimmy Kite in the accompanying text, see Appendix 2. They are now held in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. They seem to have been purchased by Dr Herbert Basedow from Mr Kearnan and Kite either during or after this 1913 visit to Adelaide.
Fig 3.29a, b, c: Erlikiyika’s carved pipe with three faces combined - a man’s face, a dingo, a bilby on each side. (SAM Registration Number A46850). Photographs courtesy of the South Australian Museum
Fig 3.30: Erlikilyika’s carving of a frog, probably a water-holding desert species, on a decorated circular base (SAM Registration Number A45087). Photograph courtesy of the South Australian Museum

Fig 3.31: Erlikilyika’s carved vase with flower design. (SAM Registration Number A45088). Photograph courtesy of the South Australian Museum

Fig 3.32: Erlikilyika’s carved plaque showing a long tailed lizard. (SAM Registration Number A35743). Photograph courtesy of the South Australian Museum
**Fig 3.33:** Erlikilyika surrounded by a montage of his kaolin and wooden carvings. Adelaide *Observer* Saturday 26 July 1913: 50

**Fig 3.34:** detail of image in Adelaide *Observer* Saturday 26 July 1913: 50 showing portrait of Erlikilyika
So Erlikilyika went back to Charlotte Waters and started his own representational practice. To do so required determination and ingenuity, if we consider the living conditions for an Aboriginal person at Charlotte Waters at the time, as described above. Erlikilyika would have had little access to paper to draw on, and nowhere to store it away from dogs, dirt, children and disruptions. I suggest that, having discovered the pleasure and the strengths of a representational practice, he swapped media, turning to carving the suitable, and readily available soft, local white kaolinite stone.

The connection between the two bodies of work has not been made by many, presumably because the drawings were in private hands and not widely known, but it is clearly made in the 1988 South Australian Museum’s Dreamings: the Art of Aboriginal Australia exhibition.200 This continuance in a new medium I interpret as a wish to sustain a representational practice: I would suggest that it was important to him, and so he invented a way to maintain it. He did develop what Sayers calls a ‘sustained, expressive and personal statement’ within the upheaval of a colonial world.201 His carving practice made him some money, and he gained local fame for his work. Examples of his carvings were displayed in the houses of local families, who later donated them to the South Australian Museum (see Appendix 2). He gained a reputation as a maker of collectable tourist souvenirs for the intrepid tourists who made it up the line to Charlotte Waters. His work is held in the National Museum of Australia, the South Australian Museum and the Australian Museum collections (see Appendix 2).

His practice of depiction disrupts an overarching colonial idea of a doomed and passive Indigenous people, unable to represent themselves at all, particularly in this changing colonial context. Erlikilyika entered into the field of recording; the observed observing. In so doing, he ran a tremor through the expected power balance: it is less easy to forget the presence of someone who is actively seeing you.

200 Sutton, Jones and Hemming 1988: 198-199.
201 Sayers 1996: 4, 10.
Putting Erlikilyika’s representational work back into the context of his country provides it with a grounded context where the underlying historical contingencies and influences that gave rise to it take on a greater resonance than any that is available when admiring the finesse of the carvings in isolation in a museum case. By the same token, the re-location of this particular individuals’ cultural responses to his changing circumstances brings the detail of the lived experience of that place into sharp relief.

He was not an isolate, an exception, a one-off genius. Amongst the debris recorded by our archaeological surface survey at Charlotte Waters were recovered a set of quirky objects (fig 3.35, 3.36, 3.37). They are related to smoking pipes, but they are hand carved from soft white stone, and non-functional, as there is no hole in the stem. Having seen these, the meaning and origin of some other enigmatic objects also became clearer, as square shaped carving precursors or off-cuts of the soft white stone shaped with rasps. Further examples of these were found in a nearby early twentieth century minor homestead site 40km away, called Tin Shanty, together with a small hand-carved animal (fig 3.38, 3.39, 3.40). So, like Namatjira after him, Erlikilyika either established a new practice, or elaborated on an existing one that may have been in existence to some extent already around the campfires.

I think that in the context of the massive dislocations of the line, combined with exposure to the potentials of a representative practice with Spencer and Gillen, and the idea of practice as more important than product, an answer to the question of why Erlikilyika wanted to draw emerges.

I would suggest that it helped him. It did so in a more elaborate form of the potent moment in the history of cross-cultural interactions – the children’s play described by Christopher Giles. There, children playing in the riverbed helped themselves to understand change through their own observations and representation of what they saw. In the observation and representation of change to oneself, it is possible to actively incorporate at least some of the content of that change. As Nicolas Thomas points out ‘creating resources which
Fig 3.35: Carved ‘pipe’, example 1, white kaolin. Surface find, Charlotte Waters, October 1997

Fig 3.36: Carved ‘pipe’, example 2, white kaolin, showing coarse file marks. Surface find, Charlotte Waters, October 1997

Fig 3.37: Carved large ‘pipe stem’, white kaolin. Surface find, Charlotte Waters, October 1997
Fig 3.38: Precursors or off-cuts from carving the soft white kaolin stone, shaped with rasps. Surface find, Charlotte Waters, October 1997

Fig 3.39: Precursors or off-cuts from carving the soft white kaolin stone, shaped with rasps. Surface find, Tin Shanty, October 1997

Fig 3.40: Small hand-carved animal, head broken off, on square base, kaolin. Surface find, Tin Shanty, October 1997
did not before exist is not just a matter of using guns, adapting to European interests in local resources for doing things in European ways – its also a matter of establishing a narrative or interpretation of events\textsuperscript{202} – in this case by Erlikilyika for himself.

**Demise of the telegraph line**

After its grand beginnings, the Overland Telegraph Line ended with a whimper. In 1923 it was still used ‘extensively and continuously’ by drovers and pastoralists, for arranging the watering and sales of stock in advance\textsuperscript{203}. The bore was still an important watering point on the stock route.\textsuperscript{204} But alternative routes for telegraph then telephone reduced its centrality,\textsuperscript{205} and both the railway and the highway routes bypassed Charlotte Waters, as the route it was built on was both prone to flooding and too waterless. The telegraph buildings became the police station and telephone office from 1930, but were abandoned to the white ants and officially closed in August 1938, the building materials having been recycled to the new police station in Finke and to New Crown pastoral station.\textsuperscript{206} It had lasted in its primary form for 60 years, becoming the foci of intense, concentrated interaction, leaving permanent changes to the shape of central Australia and the people who lived there. It is physically still there, as a distinct place. The buildings are only footings, but the wider complex around these retains overlays from all the various ways in which it has been lived in: Ancestral stories, re-namings, cattle and goat yards, ration depot, telegraph centre.

It is possible to see within the array of forms of interaction played out there four dimensions on the spectrum of possibility of continuity and transformation. Pre-existing or ‘old’ elements - something that is already known - can be maintained (for example songs, stories, place names, stone arrangements). Or old elements can be used in new forms, new ways - what Nicolas Thomas calls ‘categorical extension’ – for example places, place names; stories; exchange relations between people, large stone blade production, forms of representation.

\textsuperscript{202} Thomas 1991: 108.
\textsuperscript{203} SRSA GRS 870/00009/124/09/00031.
\textsuperscript{204} AA A659 1944/1/2894 N.T. 25/2623 Memorandum re Charlotte Waters Bore: 17/9/25.
\textsuperscript{205} Powell 1996: 83.
\textsuperscript{206} AA Series No D960/0 B1937/2963; Series No. F1 Item No. 1938/592.
Or new, unfamiliar elements can be incorporated into familiar, old uses, such as new forms of labour – and exchange and the incorporation of new materials, and food, the availability of new watering points at bores. Or new elements can be taken up as complete innovations, such as new animals, new forms of labour, new social hierarchies, sexual partners, forms of self-representation, and rations.

The small-scale history of interactions I have drawn in this chapter would not necessarily be familiar to descendents of either the Indigenous or the white people who knew the line as workers, witnesses or visitors to it, but nonetheless that history is threaded through the place.

**Continuity of song**

New interpretative signs have been put up for the first time recently at Charlotte Waters by the Apatula Aboriginal Land Trust with the Heritage branch of the Northern Territory Government. They welcome visitors to Arleyernpe or Charlotte Waters in Arrernte and English:

> Welcome, my name is Brownie Doolan. I belong to the Lower Southern Arrernte people, traditional owners of the Apatula Aboriginal Land Trust, on which the heritage site of Arleyernpe is situated. We welcome you to this site and hope you enjoy visiting the area. We hope that when you leave this site you have acquired a little more knowledge about Arleyernpe and its history. We also ask that you keep to the pathways and parking areas. Thank you

This situates Charlotte Waters squarely on Aboriginal land, and frames its history firmly under the aegis of a continuing Lower Southern Arrernte presence in the area. The old disconnect between the white histories of the Overland Telegraph Line, and the histories experienced by local Indigenous people of the interactions it initiated, is brought into a new alignment.

In 1901, 30 years after the establishment of the Overland Telegraph Line, Spencer and Gillen recorded at least 23 songs at Charlotte Waters, sung by men
and by women. The wax cylinders were re-recorded in the 1950s, and can be listened to now. They crackle and blur due to old fractures and fungal growth. But the chants are still potent and resonant. The singers’ intakes of breath at the end of each verse can be heard. The imitation of the cry of plover in the Rain song is undiminished by the three decades of change to the moment of record in 1901, and 108 years of storage since.

In 1998, 97 years after Spencer and Gillen’s recordings, linguist Luise Hercus played them to three old men of the area, one of whom was Brownie Doolan, the others Laurie Stuart and Bingey Lowe. They laughed uproariously at the women and men quarrelling, refusing to translate the insults as they were too rude, with the women worse than the men! Then they started to sing together with the Lower Southern Arrernte ceremonial songs. They learnt the songs from the Old People as stockmen on the cattle stations, in camp behind Mt Dare station, and out at the widespread yards and bores.

In this moment, there is a folding together of transformation and continuity. There is a conjunction between long-lasting learning in country by station cattlemen, and a sideways slippage into long-term record through the impersonal, external form of the wax cylinder. The two distinct forms of learning and teaching, referred in chapter 1, meet. Both are stirring in their endurance. Where younger generations of local Indigenous people have not followed in the full intergenerational transmission of this knowledge, the external records, direct inter-cultural products of the ruptures of the Overland Telegraph Line that they are, might fuel forms of future continuities. For local white people, the transmission of the stories might transform how they learn, and so how they can understand the history of people and places of the desert.

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207 Moyle 1959.