The Bitumen and Beyond: the Stuart Highway as a cultural route

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Abstract

The Stuart Highway is one of Australia’s most important transcontinental transport corridors. Named in honour of explorer, John McDouall Stuart, whose route it approximates, the highway was constructed during World War II as a major strategic defence road. It now forms part of Australia’s National Highway system, a series of roads encircling and bisecting the nation, connecting all the States and Territories and Australia’s largest and most important cities. The route, however, has a much longer history involving multiple layers of meaning, significance and cultural interactions. Existing efforts at interpreting and preserving the highway tend to focus on its more tangible, physical attributes or on particular, discrete phases of its history. This article argues that by exploring its history and significance as a ‘cultural route’, a richer understanding emerges of its dynamic nature and the overlays, conflicts and intersections of meanings across time and space. The article explores the route’s multilayered history and the ‘construction’ of its cultural significance, based on both tangible and intangible qualities – a process of interactions between physicality, history, mythology, past and present; as well as between different cultural groups. Such an approach emphasises the importance of a holistic assessment of routes such as the Stuart Highway in efforts to understand, interpret and preserve their cultural significance.

Introduction

‘The Stuart Highway has about it an aura of stark heroism, of haunting romance. It’s our equivalent of ancient spice routes, of the Canadian Pacific Railway, of the Grand Trunk Road, prizing riches from the uninhabitable’. These words by Australian travel writer, Keith Willey, in an article for Walkabout magazine in 1973, convey something of the romanticism surrounding Australia’s first transcontinental highway. Better known as simply ‘the Track’ or ‘the Bitumen’, the Stuart Highway connects Port Augusta in South Australia to Darwin in the Northern Territory, through Central Australia and the Great Australian Desert, a distance of almost 3,000 km or 1,800 miles. As a transcontinental transportation corridor the highway embodies particular cultural symbolism. Since its earliest incarnations, successive generations have travelled the south-north ‘road’ through the Centre in journeys around Australia and beyond. Following its formal construction during World War II, the Stuart Highway developed its own folklore as an iconic touring route.

The highway also exemplifies the concept of a ‘cultural route’, as defined by UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee in 1994 and further developed by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Cultural Itineraries (CIIC), in that it encompasses multiple layers of meaning based on the dynamics of movement, exchange and interaction over a long period of time, across a wide geographic region and among diverse cultural groups. The Stuart Highway as a cultural
route is broadly conceptualised here as encompassing multiple north-south transcontinental transport and communications corridors, including telegraph, rail and road routes. Such routes embody and intersect with Aboriginal tracks and paths of European exploration, settlement and journeying such as the Overland Telegraph Line and various incarnations of a long-envisioned transcontinental railway, including the famed ‘Ghan’, as well as the various historical alignments of the highway itself. The route’s significance derives not from any one historical phase or particular sites, but is greater than the sum of its parts. By taking a longer and broader view of the route itself, beyond its physical and tangible dimensions, this article seeks to demonstrate how exploring the highway as a cultural route offers a deeper understanding of its cultural significance, thereby enhancing its interpretation.

Aboriginal pathways

Little is known about how and why Aboriginal habitation of Australia began, but it is thought that the first Aboriginal occupants sailed from Asia some fifty-thousand years ago, reaching this continent via the Indonesian islands of Sulawesi, formerly the Celebes, and the western tip of Papua New Guinea, thence by land, as sea levels were lower at the time (Lee 2010:3-4). For tens of thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans, the entire Australian continent was inscribed with the routes travelled by Aboriginal inhabitants. Aboriginal culture was intimately connected to the land, based on a sense of belonging rather than possession, and creation legends that tell of ancestors’ travels and exploits explain how the landscape and its major topographical features, including water sources, were created as well as providing navigational markers. These ‘songlines’ formed important routes of communication along which people, goods and knowledge flowed, often across vast distances, and were celebrated in cycles of songs, stories and rituals (Kerwin 2006). Each Aboriginal language group, defined by territorial boundaries, had their own songlines. Only those who belonged to the particular group could sing the songs, tell the stories, participate in the rituals, and travel the permissible routes (Mulvaney 2002:4). Thus, Aboriginal songlines create and recreate spatial, spiritual and cultural connections between people and place (Somerville & Perkins 2010:22-3).

The central inland corridor through which the Stuart Highway now passes encompassed the territory of several Aboriginal language groups. Among these, the region extending from the South Australian border to Alice Springs and north towards Tennant Creek was the territory of the Arrernte or Aranda peoples, while the Walbiri or Warlpiri occupied an area north of Tennant Creek (Strehlow 1965:123,125). One of the Arrernte creation ancestors is the Native Cat (tjilpa) and its songline is among the longest, traversing all of Central Australia from Port Augusta on ‘the south coast, where seagulls lived, ever onwards to the north coast, the crocodile’s home’ (Donovan & Wall 2004:41). The creation story tells of how one of the tjilpa hordes travelled from Port Augusta and entered the Arrennte territory at Ilbila, a series of springs west of Alice Springs. After the tjilpa men had gone on, night overspread the land behind them and they laid down a great expanse of sandhills, covered with stands of desert oaks as a barrier. This describes the topography of the south-western Northern Territory: thick mulga growing around the hills bordered by waterless sandhills (Strehlow 1965:134-5).

The Arrernte engaged in trade and ceremonial exchanges with neighbouring groups in arid areas, including the Alyawarre and the Northern and Eastern Arrernte, the Wangkangurru of the southern Simpson Desert and the Arabana to the west of Lake Eyre. The groups gathered at places such as the Native Cat (Urumpele) site, an important ceremonial area roughly midway between Alice Springs and Lake Eyre (Donovan & Wall 2004:40). Waterholes near Coglin Creek, near its junction with the Finke River, closer to the South Australian border at what is now Charlotte Waters, formed part of the Emu ritual songline, which traversed a wide region from Port Augusta to north-eastern South Australia and was also of great importance for the Arrernte peoples (Mulvaney 2002:6). As John Mulvaney has pointed out, ochre was a highly-prized article of trade and, although a major source was a subterranean mine at Karrku in Warlpiri country north of Alice Springs, ochre obtained from a quarry in the Flinders Ranges was regarded as superior due to its smooth, silvery appearance, which was attributed to the blood of the creation Emu (Mulvaney 2002:4-5).
Arabana and Wangkangurru peoples were connected to the mound spring country of northern South Australia. Mound springs are the natural outlets for the pressurised ground water of the Great Artesian Basin and exist around its margins as the only permanent drinkable water in some of Australia’s driest regions. The springs featured prominently in many Arabana and Wangkangurru myths and songlines, with individual springs taking on varying roles, from simple watering points to locations where important actions or incidents in creation stories took place (Harris 2002:8). The knowledge embedded within those songlines laid the foundations for the pathways of later European journeys.

The first regular contact between Indigenous Australians and ‘others’ began in the seventeenth century, when Indonesian traders, known as Macassans, from south Sulawesi began visiting the islands and coast of northern Australia. Travelling in sailing vessels called praus, via a sea passage, known as the ‘Malay Road’, they searched for sea slugs (trepang or beche de mer) which were prized by the Chinese in dried form as an aphrodisiac (Blair 2010; Lee 2010:5). According to Frank Clune, the Macassans also procured Aboriginal labour by force (Clune 1955:23). The impact of such cross-cultural interaction is evidenced in Indigenous art, oral history, song and dance (Blair 2010). Following British colonisation, more extensive interaction took place between Indigenous peoples and Europeans.

**Crossing the continent**

From the earliest days of British settlement, Australia’s ‘dead heart’ held a fascination. Speculation about what lay at the centre of the continent, including rumours about the possibility of a vast inland sea, and the need to find productive land, motivated several exploratory expeditions in the mid-nineteenth century, and many tried, unsuccessfully, to completely cross the vast, unknown inhospitable interior. The first to complete a south-north coast to coast crossing, through the Centre, was Scottish explorer and surveyor, John McDouall Stuart, who finally succeeded in 1862 via the route as shown in Figure 1 (Betheras 1957:29,31).

Stuart’s success relied on the knowledge gained from earlier expeditions – including his own in 1858, 1859 and 1860 – particularly regarding the location and strategic importance of water sources. Stuart’s journals make several detailed references to the mound springs, invariably accompanied by observations of ‘native tracks’ or other indications of Aboriginal presence. His party sometimes followed these tracks to water or asked the Aborigines where to find it, and they usually obliged. Near Newcastle Waters, Stuart recorded on 6 May 1862:

‘Returned to the camp and found all well. Yesterday they were visited by a few natives who seemed to be very friendly; they called water “ninloo:” they were armed with spears, about ten feet long, having a flat sharp flint point about six inches long, with a bamboo attached to the other end. They pointed to the west as the place where they got the bamboo and water also’ (Hardman 1975:343).

Stuart realised that the mound springs were ‘strategic stepping stones to the interior and, ultimately, the northern
shores of Australia’ (Harris 2002:9). He could not fully understand the profound significance of
the pathways with which his own journey intersected, but he knew that his ultimate success
depended upon them.

Stuart’s journeys also reveal something of the complex nature of interactions with Aboriginal
inhabitants. The previous expedition was abandoned following a hostile encounter on 26 June
1860 at a place that would ever after be known as ‘Attack Creek’, just north of Tennant Creek.
A few days earlier, a group of Aboriginal men – an older man and two younger – visited
Stuart’s camp, where a friendly exchange initially took place in which the Aborigines presented
the Europeans with gifts of four possums and some birds and reportedly also exchanged a
‘masonic sign’ with Stuart. The mood soured, however, when the visitors proceeded to take
some of the party’s camp gear in return, to which Stuart objected, forcibly taking it back and
ordering them to leave, which may have precipitated the retaliatory ‘attack’. Surprised by a
shower of boomerangs, ‘fearful yelling’ and setting fire to the grass, Stuart fired on the group,
bouto little effect. Outnumbered and realising their vulnerability, Stuart and his party retreated
(Clune 1955:91-3). ‘Attack Creek’ has subsequently become a key site in the mythology of
the Stuart Highway route; however, it is usually interpreted within the discourse of the heroic
pioneering narrative, symbolic of the dangers and obstacles that Stuart and his like had to
overcome, with little attention to more complex cultural dynamics.

Stuart named various distinctive landmarks on his route, thereby commencing the process
by which the landscape’s Aboriginal significance was overlaid and overwritten with European
meanings. As John Mulvaney points out, Stuart named a sandstone column ‘Chambers Pillar’,
after one of his Adelaide-based financial backers. For Aboriginal peoples, whose tracks Stuart
had noticed around the structure, the landmark represented the embodiment of Itirkawara,
a knob-tailed gecko, who was transformed into the sandstone pillar because of sexual
transgressions committed with women of the wrong kinship group. Subsequent European
travellers, led by Ernest Giles in 1870, carved their names into this landmark as they passed,
unwittingly desecrating a sacred Aboriginal site. A nearby mound, which Stuart named ‘Castle
Hill’, originally represented a female crouching in shame (Mulvaney 2002:5). Stuart’s successful
expedition thus began a process of dispossession which intensified in the following decades.
Yet, while European encroachment transformed the Aboriginal way of life, it did not eliminate
cultural traditions and there is evidence of continuity, adaptation and cross-cultural exchanges
along the route well into the twentieth century, as will be discussed later.

Stuart demonstrated the symbolic significance of his coast-to-coast journey through a
ceremonial performance of his own. Upon reaching the Indian Ocean on 24 July 1862, he
recorded: ‘I dipped my feet, and washed my face and hands in the sea, as I promised the late
Governor Sir Richard McDonnell [sic] I would do if I reached it’ (Hardman 1975:406-7). Stuart’s
arduous journey, which almost killed him due to drought, malnutrition, scurvy and lame horses,
became a story of stoic heroism and triumph over the harsh environment. It is representative of
the pioneering tradition of the frontier that has had such a powerful and enduring resonance
in Australian cultural consciousness, hence contributing to the route’s significance.

The Overland Telegraph Line

As well as assessing the economic potential of the region traversed, one of the major objectives
and outcomes of Stuart’s journey was to establish the route for construction of the Overland
Telegraph Line, a vital communications link between Australia and Britain. The telegraph line,
built between 1870 and 1872, ran for 1,800 miles from Port Augusta to Darwin, where it was
connected by an undersea cable to Java (Indonesia) and India, thence to Britain. Australia’s
geographic isolation meant that mail sent by sea took months to arrive. The Overland Telegraph
Line allowed direct communications between Australia and Britain for the first time. Its
construction was itself a feat of remarkable endurance and it is considered one of Australia’s
greatest engineering achievements (Pearce & Alford 2006:90). The line represented ‘a thread
of civilisation running through the desert’, as Morse repeater stations formed the nucleus of
settlements, then towns, including: Charlotte Waters, Beltana, Alice Springs, Barrow Creek and
Tennant Creek (Clune 1947:193).
The Overland Telegraph Line provided a travelling stock route and laid the way for the expansion of pastoralism, mining and the arrival of other cultural groups. From the outset, Afghan cameleers played a role in building the Overland Telegraph, transporting construction materials and supplies for workers (Stevens 2002:71-2). Pastoralists, Thomas Elder and Samuel Joseph Stuckey introduced camels into Australia in 1863 to carry wool and station supplies. They established a base for a commercial carrying business at their Beltana property, south of Marree and from there they supplied camels and labourers to work on the Overland Telegraph. As Christine Stevens notes, the cameleers were known generally as ‘Afghans’ and while many came from what is now Afghanistan, others were from Pakistan and India. Camels proved to be more reliable than horses or bullocks in traversing sandy and waterless terrain, ensuring continuous supplies and enabling work to forge ahead across difficult and unknown territory (Stevens 2002:2,72-2).

Cultural collisions and interactions

Many Afghans remained in Australia after their initial contracts ended and by the later nineteenth century, several owned and operated their own carrying businesses throughout the inland. Following completion of the Overland Telegraph Line, cameleers continued to ply the route, serving pastoral and mining communities. Cultural tensions developed based on racial and commercial grounds, as the cameleers competed with and threatened the survival of the European horse and bullock teamsters. The Afghans’ strange appearance, dress, language and culture, and even stranger animals were often met with distrust and derision. They set up rough makeshift camps and later ‘Ghantowns’, separated from European communities, the largest being at Marree on the Birdsville Track (Stevens 2002).

The Aboriginal population also regarded the Afghans with suspicion. In one of few studies of the Aboriginal reaction to the Afghan presence in north-eastern South Australia, anthropologist, Luise Hercus recorded stories from members of the Arabana and Wanganuru communities. The Aboriginal peoples of the area regarded the Afghans, like the Europeans, as outsiders. The Arabana people called the Afghans Abiganas, meaning ‘white fellows with hair-string’, referring to their turbans. A major concern was the perceived threat that the Afghans posed in taking Aboriginal women and girls. Many of the stories told about encounters between women and Afghans were intended to scare young women and warn them to beware of the Afghans (Hercus 1981). Relations between the races were not always hostile, however, and many of the Afghans eventually formed relationships and marriages with Aboriginal women; and some Aboriginal men worked with Afghan camel teams (Stevens 2002:218).

The encroachment of foreign animals and people that accompanied and followed construction of the telegraph line further displaced and antagonised the Aboriginal inhabitants. In February 1874 at Barrow Creek, stationmaster, James Stapleton and linesman, John Franks were killed by local Aborigines in an attack which inevitably brought violent retribution. The gravestone of Stapleton and Franks remains in place today. As resources were depleted, Aboriginal groups gravitated towards repeater stations, where they received rations because they were no longer able to live fully on their traditional lands (Mulvaney 2002:5-6).

Yet, there is also evidence of survival, continuity and adaptation of cultural traditions as well as cultural exchange along the route. Frank Gillen, who staffed the Charlotte Waters repeater station in the 1880s, accompanied Baldwyn Spencer, leader of the Horne scientific expedition, on an anthropological study. They travelled along the telegraph line in 1901, filming Aboriginal activities and ceremonies, assisted by Arrernte men. Gillen learned to converse in the language and published a word list as his first study (Mulvaney 2002:6).

Hermannsburg Mission, approximately 130 km south-west of Alice Springs, was founded by Lutheran missionaries from Hanover in Germany in 1877, bringing another cultural dimension to the region. The mission church, rebuilt in 1896, bears an inscription in the Arrernte dialect as well as German and English. Victor Cranley visited the mission with a party of English tourists in the 1960s and remarked upon hearing ‘Silent Night’ being sung in the Arrernte language. Continuing towards Darwin, the group stopped at Warrabri Aboriginal Reserve where they
witnessed ceremonial performances, including the Frog and Emu dances (Cranley 1963:37,51). Even in the mid-1970s, when changes to the southern portion of the Stuart Highway’s route were being planned, a report noted the presence of sites of ceremonial significance, sacred to the Aboriginal peoples of the area, although exact locations were not identified (South Australian Highways Department 1976:29). Mulvaney notes that Uluru, west of Alice Springs was the focus for several Aboriginal songlines traversing the area and that clans continue to travel those routes for ceremonial and other activities (Mulvaney 2002:6). While Hermannsburg and Uluru are located considerable distances from the Stuart Highway itself, they represent important sites in the movement of different cultural groups across the region. More recently, they also constitute potential diversions for tourists travelling the route.

A multi-layered communications route

The Overland Telegraph Line paved the way for the development of further layers of communications and transportation routes along the north-south inland corridor. From the late 1870s efforts to expand settlement and to better serve existing pastoral interests inspired plans for a transcontinental railway linking Adelaide and Darwin. Such plans would not be fully realised until the early twenty-first century, but sections of railway crept towards the Centre from south and north, beginning with a line from Port Augusta to Oodnadatta, constructed between 1879 and 1891. Meanwhile, in 1887 construction began on the northern section of the line from Darwin to the Pine Creek goldfields, opening in 1889 and extending to Birdum in 1924. Some three thousand Chinese labourers were imported to work on the railway. In the 1890s the South Australian government predicted that a transcontinental railway would transform the state into the true ‘heart’ of Australia. The terminus in Darwin would become the ‘gateway of Australia’ and a ‘great port of import from the East and of export for Australian products’ (Bishop et al. 2008:31-4). Plans for re-routing and extending the railway between Adelaide and Darwin began in 1924 and by 1929 the line reached Alice Springs. This route became known as the ‘Afghan Express’, evidence of the cultural legacy of the Afghan cameleers who had plied the route from the 1860s–1930s. In 1957 the southern section was upgraded and re-routed, bypassing Oodnadatta, continuing to Alice Springs in 1972 (Bishop et al. 2008:37). The entire transcontinental rail link was not completed until 2003 and the Adelaide to Alice Springs section now parallels the Stuart Highway, further west of the original line, ‘The Ghan’ name now refers to the entire route, as a powerful reminder of its history and is one of the most renowned railway journeys in Australia (Stevens 2002:319-20).

A road across Australia and beyond

The rough tracks formed by the Overland Telegraph Line and the partly-constructed transcontinental railway provided some direction, if not much comfort, for intrepid travellers, for whom the challenge of crossing the continent from coast to coast proved irresistible. Jerome Murif was the first cyclist to complete the south-north crossing in 1897, while Henry Dutton and Murray Aunger completed the first transcontinental crossing by car in 1908. An article in the September 1908 issue of the Australian Motorist magazine celebrated the significance of Dutton and Aunger’s achievement: ‘Certainly Messrs. Dutton and Aunger have opened up possibilities of a grand motor car route which will one day link up Northern and Southern Australia, leading to trade development and settlement and a shortened route to Europe’. It is remarkable that even at this early stage, the idea had been sown that the south-north route was a ‘road’ leading to the world beyond Australia’s borders.

One of the best known overlanders of the early twentieth century was Francis Birtles, who completed several tours around and through Australia, travelling the north-south route extensively, first by bicycle, then by motor car. In November 1924, Birtles drove from Darwin to Adelaide in an Oldsmobile in the record time of nine days, nine-and-a-quarter hours. In a publication celebrating Birtles’ feat, the British Imperial Oil Company urged the construction of an improved motor route, both as an aid to national defence and to open up the country for development. The company also saw the route as part of an extended communications link with Europe, augmenting the existing telegraph and the emerging era of airline transport,
declaring that ‘our northern coasts...are in the direct line of march of the great air highways from Europe and India’. Darwin was seen as a gateway port in the planned airline route between London and Australia, terminating in Melbourne. The publication juxtaposed images of ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’, contrasting the overland route ‘worn by pack-camels’, with the future, as represented by motor and air transportation (see Figures 2 and 3). According to British Imperial Oil, when Trans-World Airways brought ‘Australia within ten days of London, the need for an efficient North to South highway would become even more imperative’ (British Imperial Oil Company Limited 1924).

Figure 2: The Overland Route ‘Yesterday’.

Figure 3: ‘Tomorrow’ Overland Route as part of transnational air and motor route.

Figure 4: Aborigines with Frances Birtles’ car 1924. (Source: British Imperial Oil Company Limited 1924)
In 1927-8, Francis Birtles became the first person to drive from London to Melbourne via the Middle East, India, Burma, Malaya and Singapore, wherefrom he boarded an oil tanker for Darwin (Nicholson 1960). Birtles’ journey heralded the beginning of what would become a popular overland route between Australia and Europe, later termed the ‘hippie highway’ or ‘hippie trail’ due to its popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. The ‘highway’ is not a rigidly-defined route, and, although it is imagined as a ‘road’, may encompass sea and rail passages. The overland route complemented Qantas airlines’ legendary ‘Kangaroo Route’, later ‘QF1’, from Australia to London via Asia and the Middle East, which began in 1947. As Darwin was commonly a transit point or gateway in journeys to and from Australia, the south-north transcontinental road and later Stuart Highway could be considered as part of a longer route, extending beyond Australia’s borders, thus echoing the transnational telecommunications link established by the Overland Telegraph Line.

The Stuart Highway as strategic defence route

The north-south route remained little more than a rough track until World War II, when anxieties about Australia’s vulnerability to invasion escalated (see Figure 5). The continent was particularly at risk of attack from the north, given its proximity to Asia. The north-south transcontinental corridor was seen as a vital pathway in the nation’s defence strategy. Hence, in early 1940, plans were drawn up for a road between Alice Springs and Birdum, capable of carrying military vehicles such as would be required in the event of an emergency. The Commonwealth government formed the Allied Works Council and enlisted the state road authorities of New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia to assist in undertaking the project. A graded, gravel-surfaced road between Tennant Creek and Birdum was completed in the record time of ninety days, with the intention of upgrading it once the wet season had passed. The route followed approximately the Overland Telegraph Line but varied by as much as eight miles (13 km) from it due to the necessity for several creek crossings (Tanner 1995:1-2,15). The completion of this section of the road in such a short time and in difficult, remote terrain was celebrated as a remarkable achievement, with the road lauded as the ‘Ninety Days Wonder’ (Terry 1941:13).

By mid-1943, there was a high volume of traffic on the road, including American units, Dutch and Chinese Labour Corps (Terry 1959:4-5). Those who travelled and worked along the route created new layers of meaning as well as connecting with earlier ones. Clement Govett recorded his memories of several trips up and down ‘the Track’ with the Australian Army convoys working on the North-South road during World War II. For Govett and his colleagues the experience was a mixture of hard grind and long sections of monotonous travelling, punctuated by occasional

Figure 5: On the Overland Telegraph Route 1929. (Source: NT Library)
sightseeing opportunities. On the final leg to the rail head at Larrimah, the road closely followed the Overland Telegraph Line. Govett was keen to point out a section in which the original single wire was still visible: ‘This gave all who passed a chance to see the famous telegraph line in its original form ... the line that had been built under great hardship many years before ... to link Australia with Europe’ (Govett 1974). A new landmark created during the war years was ‘Churchill’s Head’, a rock formation that bore a remarkable resemblance to Britain’s wartime Prime Minister, particularly when someone placed a log as a cigar in its ‘mouth’ (see Figure 6).

Bitumen sealing of the north-south Road between Larrimah and Alice Springs was completed in December 1943, and this section of the road was named the Stuart Highway in April 1944 (Tanner 1995:153-4,204). The southern section of the road between Port Augusta and Alice Springs was less heavily utilised during the war years, so this section was not improved until much later. By 1968 the southern section was also named the ‘Stuart Highway’; however, it was not until the mid-1970s that major upgrading bituminising and some realignment of the route took place. The entire length of the Stuart Highway from Port Augusta to Darwin became part of the national highway system, introduced in 1974, under which the federal Government assumed responsibility for funding of major national roads. While the northern section from Alice Springs to Darwin remained relatively close to its original alignment, the southern section between Port Augusta and Alice Springs was rerouted several kilometres to the west of the original line and this new ‘Stuart Highway’ was officially opened in 1987 (Wells 2005:140-41).

**Beyond ‘the Bitumen’: constructing a legend**

Almost as soon as the northern section of the road was completed during World War II, folklore developed surrounding the Stuart Highway. The fact that a world-class road could have been built at all, across those black soil plains, amazed many. The speed of its construction was also a first for Australia; hence, many called it ‘the miracle highway’ (Bernstein 1966:31). As the sole land transport link between Alice Springs and Darwin, for Territorians the forty-foot strip of bitumen was their life blood, supplying mining districts and pastoral stations, transporting cattle and goods in road trains, and facilitating the tourism boom that began in the post-war era. Nicknamed ‘the Track’, ‘the Road’, ‘the Bitumen’ or, to long distance transport drivers, ‘the Bitch-O’Mine’, it soon developed legendary status beyond anything its planners or builders could have envisaged (Lockwood 1964:13). As travel writer Kathleen Woodburn wrote in 1947: ‘The Bitumen is more than just a road. It is an identity, and has a life and influence of its own such as few other highways possess’ (Woodburn 1947:16).
The Stuart Highway’s ‘identity’ has evolved through a process of interactions between tangible and intangible elements, including: its physical environment, location, material attributes and the stories associated with the route. Traversing the outback, through the ‘heart’ of the continent to the tropical north, the highway encompasses regions that have long been mythologised as the ‘real’ Australia. Embracing the nation by driving around and through it has been a highly symbolic national ritual since the earliest days of motoring. The long, straight stretches of bitumen that now characterise the highway also contribute to its aura and status as one of Australia’s iconic road trips. The route has become an essential part of any round-Australia journey for local and international travellers from backpackers to ‘grey nomads’, furthering possibilities for cross-cultural exchange and interaction. Yet, many modern travellers also seek to connect their own journeys with those of earlier eras. For example, Douglas Lockwood, who travelled extensively up and down the Stuart Highway from the mid-twentieth century, commented that he always stopped at Attack Creek, to ‘drink a silent toast to one of the greatest of all Australian explorers, a man who proved that his heart was made of Highland rock’ (Lockwood 1960:17). In 1972, retiree, Huldah Turner recorded in her diary of a round-Australia road trip that, ‘travelling along the Stuart Highway is travelling over Stuart’s journey and the trail of the Overland Telegraph’ (Turner 1972:98).

**Interpretation and preservation**

The Stuart Highway is not listed, in whole or in part, on any national or state heritage register and apart from tourism interpretation strategies, relatively little attention has been given to assessing, interpreting and preserving its cultural heritage. Current efforts tend to focus on physical aspects of the highway itself. The northern section of the highway between Alice Springs and Darwin is managed by the Northern Territory Government and Department of Infrastructure and Planning, and from 2007 historic engineering markers were erected at various locations along the route. According to the Institution of Engineers, Australia, examples of each era of the road’s construction remain in use. The 1990s saw the beginning of greater efforts at interpreting the Stuart Highway as part of the Northern Territory’s tourism strategy, but again, the emphasis is on physical sites and discrete phases in the route’s history. The Northern Territory Tourism commission promoted the Stuart as the ‘Explorer Highway Tourist Drive’, with the aim of encouraging travellers to stop at various points along the road (Carment 2001:91). Key sites focus on those associated with Stuart’s expedition, the Overland Telegraph Line, including former telegraph stations and memorials; as well as remnants of the pastoral and mining era. Such interpretation privileges the heroic pioneering narrative and the few stories relating to Aboriginal heritage that are interpreted along the route usually focus on sites of conflict with Europeans, such as Attack Creek and the Barrow Creek telegraph station.

The wartime era is also generously represented. In 1992 the old north-south road was re-opened as a detour from the Stuart Highway and this allowed travellers to experience something of the wartime highway, including ‘Churchill’s Head’. The Northern Territory Tourist Commission’s publication, *A Wartime Journey: Stuart Highway Heritage Guide*, released in 2006, is accompanied by two audio compact discs, with narration, music and archival sound grabs, telling the wartime story of the highway in the recordings of soldiers, airmen, nurses and construction workers, who describe the wartime sites. Extant sites include remains of construction and staging camps, wells, bores and maintenance depots.

A more recent innovation is the ‘Stuart Highway Fence’ in Alice Springs, which was designed by Susan Dugdale in 2008. The fence, which borders the commercial center of the town, provides a protective screen for the railway yards and incorporates an abstract map of the highway from Port Augusta to Darwin, and Indigenous art of the region, representing ‘a cultural mapping of country’. Designed to be viewed while moving – walking, cycling or driving – the fence is described as ‘an abstract representation of travel and movement, reflecting the function of the Stuart Highway’. Such interpretation comes closer to engaging with the dynamic nature of the route, its intangible qualities and its significance for Aboriginal peoples.
Conclusion

The Stuart Highway is one of Australia’s most significant cultural routes. Its significance cannot be understood simply in terms of its physical character as a ‘road’ or ‘highway’, but needs broader definition, encompassing both tangible and intangible elements. The highway traverses a route that is richly layered, complex and dynamic, entailing processes of cultural interaction and exchange that extend across a long timeframe and beyond Australian borders.

The concept of ‘cultural route’ better encompasses the multi-layered nature of the route itself and of the stories and meanings embodied therein, as well as their significance for diverse but interconnected cultural groups. There is a need to take account of the route’s longer-term history, and to engage with the complexities, conflicts, intersections and interactions across time and between peoples. The space thus revealed is one in which meanings are not linear, progressive, discrete or static, but overlapping, interconnected and dynamic. There is also need for greater exploration of the nature and extent of cultural interactions along this route. This paper has sought to contribute to that endeavour and to offer a more holistic understanding of its history and significance.

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