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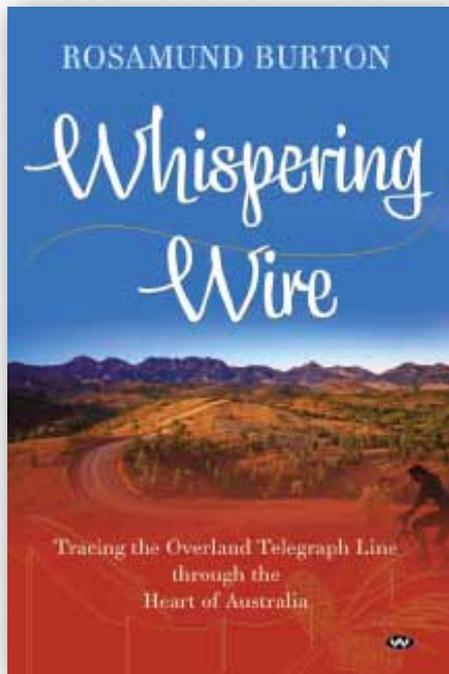
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Whispering Wire

Tracing the Overland Telegraph Line through the Heart of Australia

by Rosamund Burton

22 October 2022, Memoir, RRP \$34.95, PB, ISBN 9781743059609



The 3200-kilometre-long Overland Telegraph Line from Adelaide to Darwin was completed in 1872. It transformed Adelaide into Australia's communication hub, connecting the continent with the rest of the world and heralding the dawn of instant global communication. One-hundred-and-fifty years later, author Rosamund Burton traced the path of this largely forgotten strand of wire through the country's vast desert interior to the flood-prone Top End.

Struggling with a lack of experience and fitness, Rosamund and her friend cycle the first 800 kilometres from Adelaide through the Flinders Ranges to the deserted outback town of Farina, battling piercing winds and pelting rain, visiting sites and chatting with locals as they go. Climbing aboard a four-wheel drive with her husband, she continues along remote dirt tracks searching for derelict telegraph repeater stations, before completing the journey, from Alice Springs to Darwin, delivering an unwieldy campervan.

The author moves across the continent, storytelling, sharing its sometimes brutal history and listening to those who live in this harsh but beautiful country. This quest for connection with the land and an understanding of its people is also an exploration of what it means for the author, being Irish born, to belong in Australia.

October 2022 marks the 150th anniversary of the operation of Australia's international telegraph service, following the laying (and repair) of an undersea cable from Darwin to Java in 1871, and the completion of the Overland Telegraph Line on 22 August 1872.

Rosamund Burton was born in Ireland and grew up in England, before returning to Ireland with her family when she was 18. She became an actress, performing at Dublin's Gate and Gaiety Theatres, and in the film *Educating Rita* with Julie Walters and Michael Caine. She then worked for the UK's first left-wing think tank. She moved to Australia in the mid-1990s following her fascination with her mother's stories of growing up in Australia. She writes for a range of newspapers and magazines and lives in Sydney with her husband Steve.

Interweaving history and travel adventures, this is a funny, sometimes sad, but always intriguing journey of tracing the 3200km Overland Telegraph Line from Adelaide to Darwin.



The author, Rosamund Burton, says about the inspiration behind her book:

'When Steve, my husband, and I drove along the Oodnadatta Track over 15 years ago I was intrigued by the story of the building of the Overland Telegraph Line.'

'I was captivated by the idea of cycling along minor roads and offroad tracks, and with it came the idea of following the Overland Telegraph Line from Adelaide to Darwin.'

Rosamund mapped out the route, staying in pubs, cabins, and on sheep and cattle stations ending up in the deserted town of Farina, and covering a distance of 800km. From there she travelled by 4WD along dirt tracks to Alice Springs, and from Alice Springs she travelled to Darwin in a campervan.

Rosamund says, 'It was only when I set out that I started to comprehend the significance of this single line of wire that stretched across the continent.'

'As I travelled I began to understand what an undertaking the construction of the line was, especially given that from around modern-day Oodnadatta northwards the country was unknown to the white settlers of South Australia. When building of the telegraph line began in 1870 it had only been crossed by John McDouall Stuart and his exploring party eight years earlier.'

The Overland Telegraph Line heralded a new era of instant communication as telegrams between England and Australia took merely hours, rather than the months mail had taken by ship.

Yet this development also changed the lives of the Aboriginal Australians along the line. They found themselves dispossessed of their land within a few years. Rosamund says, **'I had no concept of the impact until I set off on this journey, and no idea that I would find a history which was so devastating.'**