

## ALICE SPRINGS AND THE CENTRE

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**T**HE RED MACDONNELL RANGES surround **Alice Springs** and are in turn surrounded by the sand plains, sandhills and gibber plains of central Australia's deserts. The deserts are unlike most other world deserts in that they are largely covered with well-adapted vegetation. Annual rainfall at Alice Springs ranges from 60 mm to 900 mm, while temperatures can be as high as 43°C and as low as -7°C. The usually dry Todd River can rise to break its banks in an hour, then be dry again a day later. The city's setting is ancient, but its buildings are often new and sophisticated.

In 1870 surveyors for the **Overland Telegraph** line found their way through Heavitree Gap and located the waterhole where, a year later, the **Alice Springs** telegraph station was built. The old buildings remain as a tourist attraction, but for nearly thirty years they were the focal point for the small local community. By 1889, though, the town of Stuart was beginning to take shape on the level ground between the telegraph station and Heavitree Gap as a centre for the pastoralists who had settled in the region since the 1870s to lay the foundations for an important cattle industry, and as a response to gold finds in the MacDonnell Ranges. More gold finds at the turn of the century led to further town development.

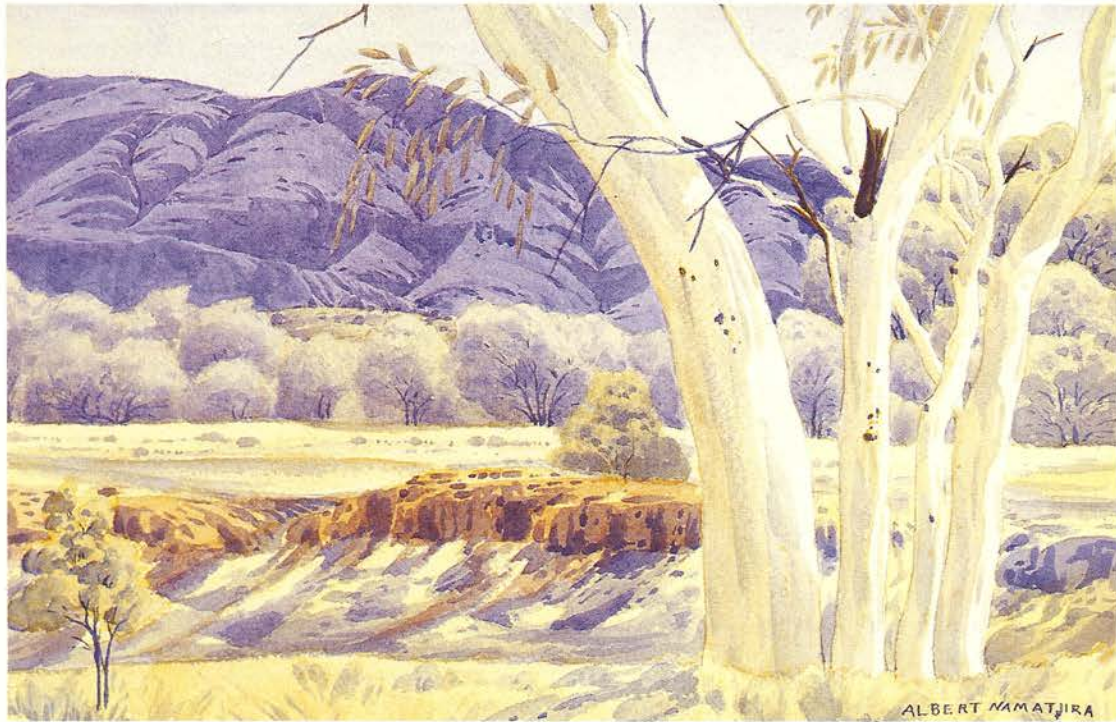
The area remained a 'duffer's paradise' for another 30 years, and yet this horseback lawlessness on the one hand was countered by civilising and modernising influences on the other. Ida Standley and Nurse Finlayson, the first teacher and first trained nurse respectively, arrived; the first motor vehicles and aeroplanes made their appearances; the first church was built; and the railway was extended from **Oodnadatta** to Stuart Town in 1929, so introducing the first of the legendary 'Ghan' trains.

Throughout the last 120 years of central Australia's history, various governments have struggled to come to grips with the implications of its location and isolation. Until 1911 it was part of South Australia's Northern Territory. Then the commonwealth took control; Adelaide and Darwin had been remote enough centres of administration, but Canberra was even more remote. From 1926 to 1931 the Northern Territory was divided into Central Australia and North Australia, the former centred on **Alice Springs**. Desirable as it was that Central Australia's individual character should be recognised, the extraordinary cost of the local bureaucracy for such a small population led to the experiment being quickly dropped. Two years later officialdom finally acknowledged popular local usage and Stuart Town became Alice Springs. In 1978 the Northern Territory was finally granted self-government.

The isolation of the Centre might have been a problem for successive governments, but it resulted in a strong sense of individualism. Characters abound in the history of the region. There were Aranda leaders such as Gurra and Sid Ross; families, such as the Gillens and the Bradshaws, connected with the **Overland Telegraph**; station families like the Hayes and the Bloomfields; Charlie Sadadeen, the first cameleer; and early storekeepers and legendary bushmen. And there was the eccentric genius Olive Pink, scourge of bureaucrats and woman of many and varied talents.

Completion of the rail link from **Adelaide** via **Oodnadatta** in 1929 heralded the beginning of tourism and consequent changes in the town and district. These changes were emphasised when E.J. Connellan established his Alice Springs based airline immediately before World War II. Further developments also occurred during the war, when the Stuart Highway to **Darwin** was bitumenised and a substantial road was built from **Tennant**





A Macdonnell Range creek. Watercolour by Albert Namatjira, 1944.

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Creek to Queensland. The 'Ghan' railway, however, remained subject to flooding and washaways for a further 40 years, and the South Road from **Alice Springs** to **Port Augusta** required bicentennial road funds to be sealed.

For a century, the Centre was the province of pastoralists (from the 1870s) and miners in the remote areas of **Arltunga** (1890–1920) and **Tanami** (1907–11 and in the 1930s); but suddenly, during the 1970–71 centenary of European settlement in the region, the old image was shattered. Americans arrived in substantial numbers to work at Pine Gap (see Alice Springs); a permanent water supply allowed town expansion; television became available; the population passed 10 000; and tourism became the key industry. Since then, the town has attracted young people and grown rapidly to become a city. In the process, its character has changed dramatically. Development resulted in the destruction of all but a few remnants of old **Alice Springs**, while suburban characteristics became dominant.

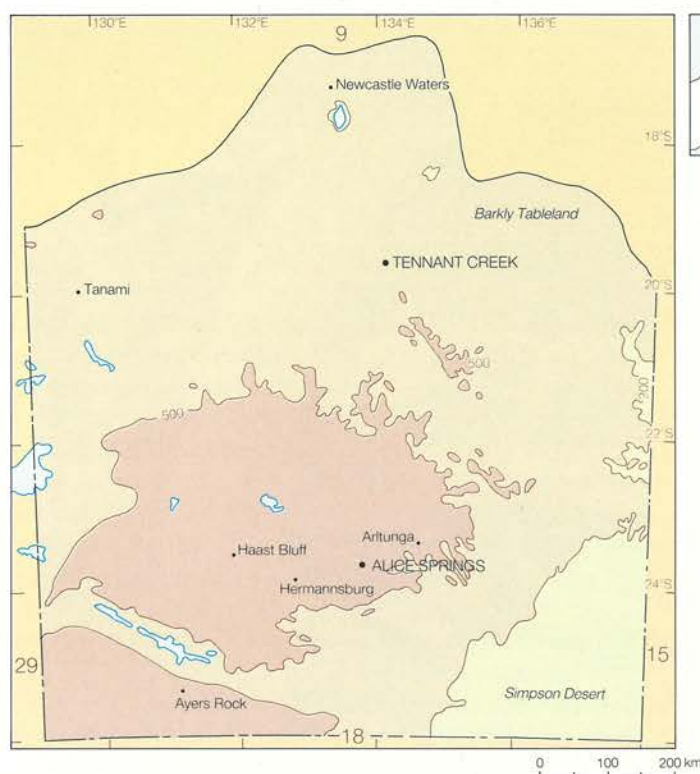
The 'town like Alice' described in Nevil Shute's novel (1950) is no more. Yet in the 1980s contact with the past remains, as well as tension between town image and city reality. Aborigines retain their sacred sites and culture. The Royal Flying Doctor Service continues its wonderful work. There are still pioneers, but they are new pioneers; tourist operators, helicopter cattle musters, road train drivers, CSIRO scientists studying arid land management and Conservation Commission officers promoting appreciation of central Australia's heritage. And all about, as always, are the land and the sunshine and the star-crystal nights. The Red Centre lives.

Richard Kimber

#### SUGGESTED READING

- D. Blackwell & D. Lockwood, *Alice on the line*, Adelaide 1976 (1965).  
C.T. Madigan, *Central Australia*, Melbourne 1944 (1936).





### ALICE SPRINGS [23°41'S 133°52'E]

Popn: 467 (1933), 4648 (1961), 18 395 (1981).

**Discovery and telegraph station** Waterhole to north of town reached by builders of **Overland Telegraph** in 1871 and named Alice Springs after wife of SA postmaster-general Charles Todd. Until 1933 town officially known as Stuart after explorer, John McDouall Stuart, first European in district on his 1860 expedition and again in area on south to north expedition of 1861–62. The Overland Telegraph was routed through Heavitree Gap to the south in 1871 and a repeater station estab at the waterhole as the first European building in central Aust. Closed in 1932, the station is now in a historical reserve (RNE). Post office and name transferred to Stuart in 1932–33. Early cattle stations in area developed at Undoolya and Owen Springs in 1872–73: the latter became Sidney Kidman's first in the region. First police station in central Aust was at the telegraph station but relocated to Heavitree Gap in 1885: the wattle and daub hut was replaced in 1888–89 by a stone building (RNE), and that was closed when a police station was built at Alice Springs in 1909.

**Town and services** Town site surveyed in 1888 as railhead for proposed rlwy following gold finds at **Arltunga**: town of Stuart estab in 1889. Gold discoveries on Arltunga field in 1902 led to an influx of miners, but the town remained smaller than the telegraph station complex. Afghans and their camel trains provided a link south to **Oodnadatta** before the rlwy. Gaol (Nat T) built in 1907–08; first school in 1914.

The town served as administrative headquarters for Central Aust while a separate territory 1927–31. The Residency built in 1926–27 for govt resident. Opening of the rlwy from Oodnadatta in 1929 led to increased development in the town.

**Flynn and the Inland Mission** First nurse of Aust Inland Mission stationed here 1916; Adelaide House nursing hostel estab in 1926, the year that a hut at the rear was used for the first Flynn and Traeger pedal radio transmission. Flying Doctor Service base estab in 1928. Rev John Flynn stationed here over a long period as AIM Superintendent. He died in 1951: his grave is a historical reserve (RNE), a memorial church in the town was built in 1956, and the mission became a museum in 1980.

**World War II and beyond** Military base and administrative headquarters for NT during war: allied commander, US Gen Douglas MacArthur, based here for some time. Road to **Darwin** sealed in 1943 as a strategic route. Tourism developed further after the war, partly due to reports from ex-servicemen (see Ayers Rock). School of the Air founded here in 1951. Virtually no rain recorded 1957–62: cattle popn of region fell from 353 000 to 177 000. Date plantation set up in the 1960s. Joint US–Aust defence and space research facility estab at Pine Gap in 1967: its exact functions have never been made public and secrecy and a fear of nuclear attack have led to disquiet and demonstrations. First sod of new, all-weather standard gauge rlwy to Tarcoola turned in 1975, line opened in 1980. Araluen Arts Centre opened in 1984.



Large permanent Aborig popn, residential college for Aborig students. Underlying racial tensions between Aborigs and sections of non-Aborig community remain high.

### ARLTUNGA [23°28'S 134°45'E]

Popn: 56 (1911), 25 (1933). Name for subgroup of Eastern Aranda Aborigs. Explorer David Lindsay reported 'rubies' (garnets) there in 1887. Miners drawn to the area discov alluvial gold, and reef gold was worked from 1890 but known deposits were soon worked out and mines deserted. Further alluvial gold was found in 1897 and activity continued to 1916. Area now a historical reserve (RNE) with ruins of govt battery and cyanide works (built in 1897, closed c1916); police station (closed in 1944); and miners' huts. Roman Catholic Little Flower Mission for Alice Springs fringe dwellers operated 1943–53. Minor prospecting continued to 1980 and beyond.

### AYERS ROCK, THE OLGAS

[25°20'S 131°01'E]

Rock named by William Gosse after SA premier Henry Ayers in 1873; mountains by Ernest Giles after Queen Olga of Spain in 1872. District explored by Gosse and Giles on rival expeditions in 1872–73, and by William Tietkins in 1889. Baldwin Spencer visited the area in 1894 and later developed an interest in Aborig anthropology. Many areas sacred to Pitjantjatjara and Yangkuntjatjara groups and associated with legends of the Dreamtime are closed to the public. Much rock art is preserved. Formerly part of Petermann Aborig Reserve. First graded road built in 1948. Ayers Rock created a nat pk in 1950; combined with the Olgas under NT Parks and Reserves Board in 1958; and reconstituted as Uluru Nat Pk under National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1977; Uluru, Aborig name for Ayers Rock, means 'great pebble'. Park granted International Biosphere Reserve status by UNESCO in 1977. Tourist facilities were moved to new village of Yulara, 20 km from Ayers Rock, in 1983–84. Ownership of Rock returned to local Aborigs in 1985 then leased back for nat pk use, a move opposed by NT govt.

### BARKLY TABLELAND [19°00'S 136°00'E]

Named by William Landsborough after Henry Barkly, gov of Vic, in 1861 while searching for Robert O'Hara Burke and William Wills. Discov by Ludwig Leichhardt in 1845; crossed by A.C. Gregory in 1856. Explored and opened for settlement by Nathaniel Buchanan in 1877–78; partly surveyed by 1879; 100 000 sheep in district by 1884 — now totally beef cattle with some of Aust's largest stations. Police outpost (RNE) built at Anthony Lagoon in 1895 to protect stock routes; used until 1979. Barkly Hwy built by Allied Works Council with US finance in World War II, upgraded in 1971 and 1980s.

### HAAST BLUFF [23°27'S 131°53'E]

Named by Ernest Giles after Julius von Haast, German geologist and explorer. Aborig reserve proclaimed in 1937; ration depot under control of Finke R Mission

set up, later controlled by Hermannsburg Mission. Haast Bluff cattle project estab in 1957 as work training scheme for Aborigs. Popn pressure led to new settlement in reserve at Papunya; begun in 1956; opened in 1960 (popn: 635 (1981)).

### HERMANSBURG [23°57'S 132°46'E]

Popn: 22 (1933), 694 (1976), 541 (1981). Named after place in Germany where missionaries trained. On Finke R, named after William Finke, friend and backer of John McDouall Stuart who discov it in 1860. First mission station in NT estab here in 1877 after Lutheran missionaries made a 22-month overland trek with livestock from Bethany, SA. First Aborig school estab in 1879. Grammar and dictionary of Aranda language compiled here in 1891. Pastor Carl Strehlow took charge in 1894 and historic core of present mission buildings (RNE) dates from 1896–1910. First NT outpost to install pedal radio, 1926. Base for Mackay Aerial Survey Expeditions 1930–33. Water pipeline built in 1935. Tannery opened in 1936, enlarged in 1961. Aborig artist Albert Namatjira born here in 1902; became famous after partnership with Rex Battarbee from 1936. Battarbee estab the Aranda Arts Council in the 1950s to market works of Aborig artists. Mission abandoned its institutional nature in 1975 but continued to provide services requested by Aborigs. Freehold title given to Aborigs in 1982.

### NEWCASTLE WATERS [17°23'S 133°23'E]

Popn: 59 (1911), 82 (1947). Waterholes named after Duke of Newcastle, secretary of state for the colonies, when discov by John McDouall Stuart in 1861: Stuart estab a base nearby from which to reach the north coast. Relay station on **Overland Telegraph** built 1870–71. Was junction of important stock routes from **Barkly Tableland** with main highway: approx 100 000 cattle were driven past each droving season before road trains.

### OVERLAND TELEGRAPH

[18°40'S 134°00'E]

In the late 1860s, SA postmaster-general Charles Todd strongly advocated a telegraph link between **Adelaide** and **Darwin** and played a vital role in seeing it finally completed in the early 1870s. John Ross surveyed route in 1870 to augment information from John McDouall Stuart's expeditions. First pole erected at Darwin in Sept 1870; reached **Katherine** in Jan 1871. Macumba R to **Tennant Creek** section opened in 1871, but great difficulties linking Tennant Creek to Darwin. Cable link with Java completed in 1871; pony express used to bridge gap between Daly Waters and Tennant Creek. Line joined at Frew's Ponds (50 km north of **Newcastle Waters**) in Aug 1872, first fully operational telegraph link with world in Oct 1872. Second line added in 1899; upgraded to telephone link in 1941. Radio microwave links expanded from the 1960s.

### SIMPSON DESERT [25°00'S 137°00'E]

First sighted by Charles Sturt in 1845. Southern edge crossed by William Poeppel's party while surveying



SA-NT border in 1879–80. Named in 1929 by C.T. Madigan after president of SA branch of Royal Geographical Soc. Madigan made aerial surveys of desert in 1929 and in 1939 was first European to cross its centre. This was the last important use of camels in Aust exploration. Desert crossed for second time in 1962, this time by four-wheel drive vehicle. Oil and gas found on southern edge in the 1960s (see Moomba).

### TANAMI

[19°58'S 129°42'E]

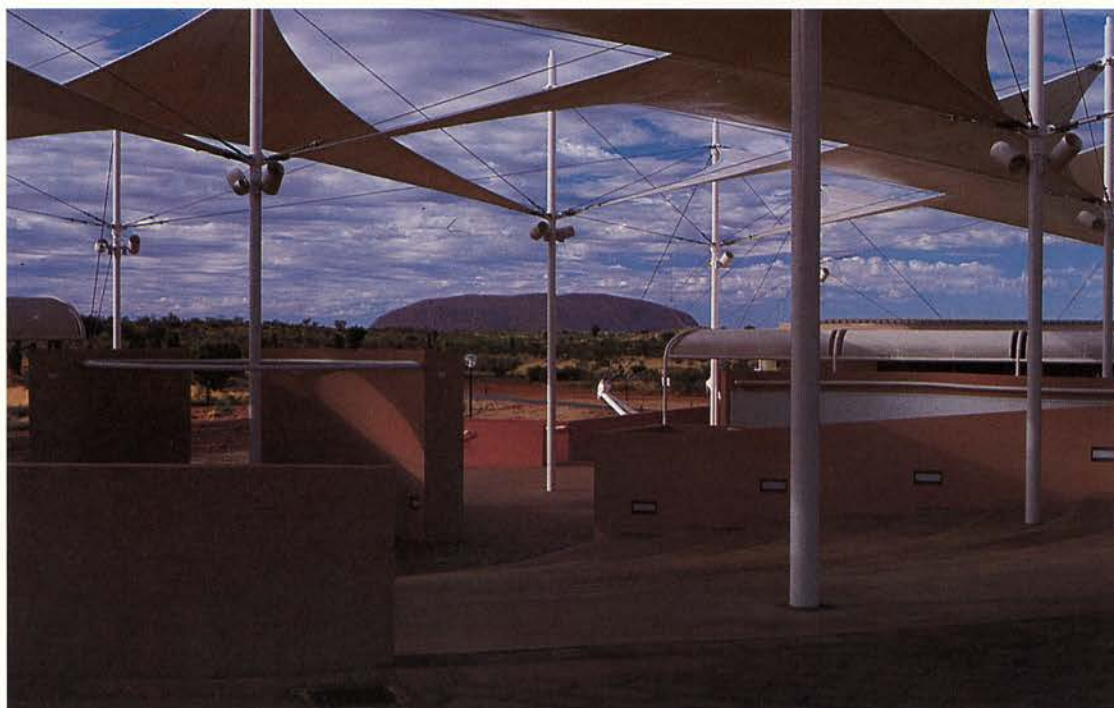
Largely unexplored area until gold found in 1900. Small but rich mining town from 1907: up to 200 miners on field in 1908–11. Many miners died of heat exhaustion or in altercations with Aboriges. Second brief rush at the Granites in 1932: C.H. Chapman found water by boring, acquired all leases, installed a battery and made a fortune before selling out in 1953. Ownership of Tanami Desert Wildlife Sanctuary returned to local Aboriges in the early 1980s.

### TENNANT CREEK

[19°38'S 134°12'E]

Popn: 21 (1933), 567 (1947), 3118 (1981). Named by John McDouall Stuart in 1860 after early settler in Port Lincoln district: Stuart in area three times 1860–62. Overland Telegraph repeater station estab in

1872, led to development of township. Gold traces found as early as 1879 but no significant mining until main field discov in 1930. Aust's 'last genuine gold rush' in 1932: settlement proper began in 1933; town surveyed in 1935 (when there were several hundred miners on the field); proclaimed in 1954. Roman Catholic church (RNE) built at Pine Creek in 1906, relocated here in 1936. Base for Mackay, Bennett and Neale's aerial exploration in 1937. Rich gold deposit found at Noble's Nob mine in 1949, became an open-cut mine after taken over by company in 1966, and has produced over 34.2m g of gold. In 1981, govt battery crushed 1244 tonnes of rock for local prospectors. Copper and gold outcrop found by prospector in 1935: developed by Peko Mines from 1960 — 30 000 tonnes per yr road freighted to Port Augusta, then shipped to Japan. Peko's Warrego mine began production in 1971 (popn: 991 (1981)). Concentrator built in 1971, smelter in 1973. In 1975 mine ceased production and 550 men retrenched. Smelter had enabled bismuth to be recovered, the area providing 95 per cent of Aust's output. Other mines have also operated at various times. Meat export is the other main industry. First reticulated water supply in 1963. Phillip Creek settlement (RNE) estab to settle Aboriges from town: moved to Warrabri 1954–56 (popn: 459 (1981)).



*The Yulara Tourist Resort was situated some distance from Ayers Rock so that it would not detract from the Rock's spectacular setting. In 1985 the federal government handed the Rock back to its traditional Aboriginal owners.*

*Photograph by Steven Dunbar, 1984.*