

GHAN TRACKS – A Jon Rose Project.

"When striving ceases, so does life." – Bertrand Russell

Ghan Tracks situates itself somewhere between a multi-media performance, an installation, live radio, and a documentary. It is above all a meditation on the notion of progress that underscores the Australian story with all its assumptions, optimism, conceit, misconceptions, and failures.



The Ghan at Alice Springs, 1930.

The present day Ghan is one of the world's great train rides, running as it does nearly 3,000 kilometres from Adelaide to Darwin; it was finally completed in 2004. The story of the building of The Old Ghan from Port Augusta to Alice Springs (1878 – 1929) and its final demise in 1980 is, however, a story that takes us on a journey through a collective memory of what it means to live on this continent, what we take, and what we cannot have.

Once, The Old Ghan famously arrived three months late in Alice Springs, the train having been delayed by floods in its cross-desert ramble from Adelaide. As we know now but did not then, rivers in outback Australia remain dry sometimes for decades, and then suddenly it rains – a lot. The original Ghan was notorious for washouts on one hand, and the bewildering and belligerent arrival of sand dunes over the track on the other; the flatcar immediately behind the tender carried spare sleepers and railway tools, so that if a washout or sand drift was encountered, the passengers and crew could work as a railway gang to repair the line and permit the train to continue. As you can read in the Train Timetables of 1949, the top speed

allowed for the Ghan was a massive 32 kph; anything above that was considered dangerous.

When the building of the Ghan was started in 1878, the white population of South Australia was no more than 300,000. The British had occupied Adelaide and its surrounds for a mere thirty years. After the successful building of the trans-Australian telegraph line in 1872, the authorities decided that South Australia would be connected to the Northern Territory and that a railway was required to maximize the great colonial adventure – the assumed potential, the exploitation of central Australia.

No one knows exactly who gave the Ghan its name. First, it was known as the Great Northern, then as the Central Australian, and finally (as the irony of conceit slowly dawned on the colonialists) as the Ghan – thus downsizing the initial imperial optimism of the enterprise – incorporating flexibility in the guise of willing foreigners who could share the blame and responsibility if it became necessary. The history of the "train to the north" is intertwined with the "Afghans" or "Ghans" who gathered at the newly arrived railheads, wherever they had reached, and with their extended camel "strings" connected the ever-expanding commercial interests of "Centralia" with the coastal populations and empire. The Afghans (actually a mix of nationalities from what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan) with their camels provided and controlled the transportation of goods and artifacts over vast tracts of Australia up until the introduction of motorized conveyance in the 1930s. The Ghans went where the train had not yet reached; one cannot tell the story of the train without referencing the story of the cameleers. Besides, the exotic camel was much more flexible than the railway as an instrument of delivery.



A cameleer in central Australia, 1920.

Just the building of the Ghan railway fills the archives with frontier stories of extreme deprivation, levels of hardship outside contemporary perception, spontaneous violence, blatant ignorance, bravery, hilarious stupidity, and environmental conditions that eventually saw the original railway's demise only fifty years after it was finally finished (that is, the link from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs). The final minutes of **Ghan Tracks** contain video images that show the last Ghan in 1980 fitted with an ingeniously conceived contraption that pulls up the very rails upon which the train sustains itself, and without which the entire venture cannot function or survive. Such a metaphor in the contemporary environmental context in which we find ourselves cannot be more succinct. However, it is too easy, from the comfort of a 4WD, to look in hindsight on the works of earlier generations with a condescending smile – and despair. The pioneers of the tough colonial adventure were, despite the unpalatable racist attitudes of the time, an extremely positive bunch with an amazing ability to survive, improvise, create and entertain, with little in the way of resources at their disposal. How would we cope in such circumstances?



Map 1. The Ghan's connection to the rail network around Adelaide.

Nurtured with neglect, disinterest, or cringe, the history of Australia can be characterised by the sheer amount that is missing from the narrative. The story of the Ghan is no exception. Most of the voices that built the Ghan and travelled with it are simply not recorded. Outside the archives of Anzac myth building, it's hard work finding the words of nation builder participants and their trains of thought . . . so, this story becomes a perfect vehicle for someone like me who relishes in creative historical intervention!

I've spent much time researching this project. Apart from experiencing the visual and sonic power of the restored steam engine that pulls the Afghan

Express, it is the photos from various public and personal archives that haunt me. Posing in front of the camera are disparate groups of colonialists, "Afghans", and indigenous people. They all have one thing in common – they are now all long dead. In some of the images, particularly where the photographic subjects have gone to great lengths to dress in their best for the occasion, the impression of all the starched whites and whiteness is that they are already taking on the role of ghosts.

Amongst the oblivion and desert ruins of a place like Farina (once fingered by the South Australian government as the future centre of a huge wheat growing region), it tests the imagination to reconstruct a community based on such solid self-belief – a town where both trains and passengers stopped and watered; where horse racing, cricket, tennis, and athletics took place on the local claypan; where there was a Ghantown on the wrong side of the tracks; where trans-continental aircraft landed to refuel; where both live religious music and secular concerts were a regular event; and where the wind will never leave you alone for long – a place of enchantment.

Meanwhile, the desert continues its reductive work and poses us with an endless supply of ontological questions. Sand and stone may seem to be elemental, but they are not irreducible; there is always another quantum layer to go – and with that goes the very human desire to explore, to go further.

A short historical survey shows that the Ghan reached Hawker in June 1880, Beltana in July 1881, Government Gums (Farina) in 1882, Hergott Springs in January 1884 (the name was changed to Marree in 1914 due to anti-German sentiment; it contained two mosques, and some 2,000 camels worked out of this key communications center), and Oodnadatta on 7 January 1891. It was not until 1926 that the stretch to Alice Springs was begun. It was finally hammered down in 1929, the year the financial crash provided capitalism with its first major question mark. Up until that time, all Ghan journeys were completed by camel, including the historic arrival of the first piano to Alice (as narrated by Ross Bolleter in "Ivories in the Outback," BBC Radio 3, 2007).

The original Ghan ran for the last time in 1980. Now, The Pichi Richi Museum runs a replica locomotive, sections of the old narrow gauge track, and the workshops and sidings at Quorn. The footage you see tonight was shot by Mark Patterson and me on this last remaining piece of narrow gauge. It was not until October 1980 that a new standard gauge line from Tarcoola, South Australia (a siding on the Trans-Australian Railway) to Alice Springs was constructed, and the train took the form it has today.

My relationship to Australia continues to be changed and challenged by the research that I've carried out on **Ghan Tracks**. I'm still not able to fully answer the question of why I feel so at home when I'm in a desert.



Map 2 (The Ghan at Lake Eyre South).



Bridge repair at the Finke River circa 1930s.



Map 3. The railhead stuck at Oodnadatta; from there to Alice only by camel.

The story of the Ghan sounds out a metaphor and a contemporary actuality for the symbiotic relationship between our species and the natural environment on which we owe our existence. In colonial Australia, the assumption was that Europeans could conquer and exploit willy-nilly that the place was there for the taking – its original inhabitants a minor irritation, its fauna considered vermin, its flora replaceable with something better. The ill-considered chaos and expectations of early settlement, farming, and gold mining can be observed today by the dozens of ghost towns and ruined homesteads encountered by tracing the tracks of The Old Ghan north of the Goyder Line. (It is estimated that by 1865, some 6,000 pastoralists, miners, and adventurers were grabbing land north of 'The Line', a mark on the map designated by the government surveyor George Goyder above which he suggested that the rainfall was inadequate to support agriculture. It rained that year, so few took any notice of him; one of Australia's many ten-year droughts followed.) The Ghan can speak as prophecy, the harbinger of our ecological demise.

The power of steam, as any train buff will tell you, goes way beyond the utilitarian. The old pre-diesel locomotives were imbued with anthropomorphic attitude, and somehow more like the mechanical voices of a cathedral pipe organ than a complaining beast of burden. Experiencing the Ghan close up (while filming for this project) remains a treasured sonic highlight.



The Old Ghan, 1929.



Remains of an Old Ghan bridge near Farina, 2005; note the narrow gauge rail.



Ruins of Margaret Siding near William Creek, Ghan track (2005); note the up-ended rails stuck in the ground.

In 1907, South Australia sold the Northern Territory (an area of land half the size of Western Europe) to the then recently formed Commonwealth of Australia for the give away price of 2,239,462 pounds sterling – and with it the responsibility to complete the Great North Railway – finished finally only in 2004! No one, of course, asked the traditional owners of the land what they thought about the sale.

In 1950 came the great flood. Lake Eyre became an inland sea of 3,000 square miles; huge tracts of the Ghan were washed away. Two years later, Lake Eyre was a vast dry saltpan once more, but local flooding continued to disrupt the Ghan. In 1963, two hundred passengers were airlifted from the helpless stranded Ghan. A passenger asked the engine driver if there were any special problems driving the Ghan; he said, "Only The Wet and The Dry, mate".

The Second World War and the opening of the huge coal seam at Leigh Creek forced the conversion of much of the old narrow gauge Ghan into standard gauge – from three feet, six inches to five feet, three inches. The war also saw the Ghan commandeered as a supply train for munitions and troops on their way north. By the 29th June 1957, standard gauge reached Marree, where passengers alighted on one platform and then moved across (after refreshments) to the other platform to continue their journey on narrow gauge north to The Alice.



Marree Station – diesel electrics from the old Ghan, 2005.



A school mistress plays recordings to the Afghan and Aboriginal students at Marree with camels in the background, 1929.

Despite all the new investments and hyperbole about the Asian century, the town of Darwin sitting of the modern Ghan maintains a refreshingly larrikin culture. The population drinks more alcohol on average than the rest of the country. There's a trendy bar called 'Ducks Nuts' and a restaurant called 'Lewinsky's' (where 'the food sucks', say the Darwinians) – and apparently when the Ghan arrived on its inaugural journey from Adelaide in 2004, a group of some sixty people lined the tracks and mooned at it. Not as a protest, but just because . . .

Jon Rose, June 2014, Alice Springs.

The Production:

Claire Edwardes – vibraphone (equal tempered), percussion

Eugene Ughetti – vibraphone (unequal tempered), percussion

Jennifer Torrence – percussion

Lamorna Nightingale - piccolo

Jason Noble – bass clarinet

Cazzbo – sousaphone

Clayton Thomas – double bass

Damien Ricketson – plectraphone, wind machine

Lucy Bell – Actor

Patrick Dickson – Actor

Peter Paltharre Wallis – speaks the traditional Arrernte story about the marauding devil dog that comes from the South to take over in the Alice.

Jon Rose – composer, multi-media, texts, conductor

Aaron Clarke – sound and lighting design

Executive producer – Jeff Khan

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