

QUEENSLAND.

OVERLAND TELEGRAPH LINES IN QUEENSLAND
AND SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

(CORRESPONDENCE RELATING TO)

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command.

Postmaster-General's Office,
Brisbane, 28th June, 1871.

SIR,

I have the honor to forward herewith a communication addressed to me by the Superintendent of Electric Telegraphs, Queensland, with reference to the Report of the Superintendent of Telegraphs, South Australia, taking exception to certain remarks made by Mr. Cracknell, in his Annual Report for 1870, on the overland line now being constructed from Adelaide to Port Darwin.

A copy of Mr. Todd's report has been sent to the Governments of the neighboring colonies, accompanied by a letter from the Colonial Secretary of South Australia, in which it is alleged that such remarks are calculated to mislead, and that assertions have been made through the press that the policy of the South Australian Government was to prevent an alternative line from being constructed; in refutation of which, it is stated that, at the Intercolonial Conference, of June, 1870, the Government of South Australia "brought the matter forward, and wished the co-operation of the other colonies in carrying out and maintaining this work, the decision of the Conference being, that it was inexpedient to consider the question at the present time, as South Australia and Queensland proposed carrying out the work."

I may here observe, that two months before the Conference sat, in 1870, the South Australian Government had already induced the representative of the British Australian Company to depart from the object of his mission to Queensland, which was to superintend the necessary works connected with a line to be made between Singapore and Burketown, in this colony.

Commander Noel Osborn called at Adelaide on his way to Queensland ostensibly for the purpose of soliciting permission from the South Australian Government for the construction of the Burketown line through their territory at Port Darwin, and while there, it transpired that a new line was to be constructed from Adelaide to Port Darwin direct, which line was then heard of for the first time; and Mr. Todd, in his report on the proposed line, dated 18th April, 1870, pointed out that this line would secure the whole of the traffic to South Australia, and that the Telegraph Company would be pledged to terminate their works at Port Darwin.

As Mr. Todd's last report has been widely circulated, and as the Colonial Secretary of South Australia, by his correspondence with the neighboring colonies, evidently wishes to enlist their sympathies, in consequence of what he terms "the unfounded statements made by Mr. Cracknell," it appears expedient, at this stage of the proceedings, to give a short *resumé* of the history of the lines now being constructed in Queensland and South Australia, in order that the true bearings of the case may be brought prominently forward, and that the entire transactions in connection with these lines may be viewed in a clear and impartial manner. In doing so, I feel compelled to remark that, as yet, I fail to see the slightest reason for the interference on the part of the South Australian Government with the original scheme of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company; and I must add that I do not think Mr. Cracknell has exaggerated the difficulties to be contended with in the South Australian line, more particularly as, on account of similar difficulties, he proposed substituting a submarine cable, where practicable, in lieu of a land line through unsettled country, and it was therefore considered inexpedient to make a land line from Burketown or Normanton to the Roper, at a cost of about £80,000, through 700 miles of country, a great portion of which is uninhabited, the maintenance of which line would fall on this colony. If he did not consider himself justified in recommending the adoption of the latter line in connection with this colony, on account of the difficulties to be contended with, it was much more imperative upon him to point out the difficulties to be met with in a line of over 1,800 miles through an almost unknown country; and I must say that he is fully justified in commenting on the South Australian line, by the fact that it is evidently anticipated by South Australia that the Queensland line could, if joined at the Roper, be made an alternative one; and, therefore, Mr. Cracknell has, by a sense of duty, been constrained to shew, as far as possible, that although under such circumstances the Queensland line would be made a secondary one, yet that, owing to the difficulties pointed out by him, the Queensland line would probably be the only reliable one.

Mr. Cracknell's letter speaks for itself.

I will now, in as brief a manner as possible, give the history of both undertakings.

At the Conference which took place in Melbourne early in 1867, the question was mooted of the overland line from Port Denison, in this colony, to the Gulf of Carpentaria, where it was intended that it should unite with the submarine cable of the Anglo-Indian Telegraph Company. Subsequently, in June and July, 1869, resolutions were passed by the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly of Queensland that it was expedient to extend the line accordingly; and an *ad interim* agreement, dated 6th October, 1870, was entered into with New South Wales that the Government of Queensland should undertake the construction of a land line to Normanton. At this time, the line from Port Denison to Cardwell, being part of the scheme, was in course of construction, and was completed in December, 1869. Operations were begun in February, 1870, on the eastern section of the Carpentaria extension, commencing at Cardwell.

Meanwhile,

Meanwhile, correspondence in connection with this subject took place in London between Captain Sherard Osborn, the manager of the Telegraph Company, and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, copies of which were forwarded to Queensland, in which Captain Osborn distinctly stated (*vide* letter, dated the 25th January, 1870), that the Telegraph Line Construction and Maintenance Company had "entered into a contract, and received the order, for constructing a system of submarine and land telegraphs for connecting Singapore with the adjacent colonies," and that the "land lines in Australia will be carried out in extension of the Queensland colonial lines, which terminate at Burketown, at the Gulf of Carpentaria, to Port Darwin, on the north-western extreme of the territory which is said to be provisionally placed under the jurisdiction of the South Australian Government"; and Captain Osborn further requested that Lord Granville would be pleased to move the Governments of Queensland and South Australia to grant the necessary permission and countenance in the execution of this undertaking. Letters were also addressed by Captain Osborn, the manager of the Company, to the Governments of Queensland and South Australia, on the same subject, in which permission was sought for the erection of the line alluded to, and accrediting Commander Noel Osborn as the representative of the company, who was to superintend the carrying out of the necessary works.

On this correspondence the Superintendent of Electric Telegraphs, Queensland, furnished a report, dated 10th May, 1870, in which he stated that the line to Normanton was being vigorously pushed on, but also stating that Commander Noel Osborn had arrived in Adelaide by the April Mail, to treat with the Government of South Australia, for permission to erect a land line through their territory from Port Darwin to our western boundary; and that the Superintendent of Electric Telegraphs, South Australia, had since recommended that that colony should construct a line of telegraph from Port Augusta (near Adelaide) to Port Darwin. This recommendation was adopted by the Government of South Australia, and the company communicated with. Mr. Cracknell, in remarking thereon, pointed out distinctly that the proposed route offered few facilities for the construction of a line, that the cost would be considerably more than was estimated, that the distance was greater than was supposed, that, in fact, it was impossible to form a reliable estimate, and adding, that it is a question of little moment to Queensland whether the South Australian proposal is carried out or not, provided the existing arrangements as regards this colony are not interfered with; and he also stated that this would seem to be their purpose, was evident by their attempting to induce the British Australian Telegraph Company to terminate their works at Port Darwin, and he commented in strong terms on the action taken by the South Australian Government in the matter, in the face of the arrangements already made. On this report (a copy of which was furnished to Mr. Todd) South Australia was silent.

On the 7th April, 1870, Earl Granville transmitted copies of a correspondence which passed between the Chairman of the British Australian Telegraph Company and his department, in which permission was requested to erect land lines from Port Darwin to Burketown, so as to connect the company's cable with the telegraph system of the other Australian Colonies. In this correspondence, Lord Monck distinctly stated that "for the project which has been undertaken by the company, the whole of the capital had been subscribed, and a contract concluded with the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, for a cable to connect Singapore and Java, and Java with Port Darwin in Australia, and for land lines thence to Burketown."

A telegram was received from the Agent-General for Queensland, dated the 14th May, 1870, as follows:—"British Australian Telegraph Company will lay cable to Normanton, in Queensland, if Australian Colonies will guarantee 5 per cent. on additional cable. Company must know by 7th August, otherwise I will probably accept offer from South Australia." Mr. Cracknell recommended that this Government should agree to guarantee. The Colonial Secretary of Queensland accordingly guaranteed, subject to the approval of Parliament, 5 per cent. on the cost of the cable, by telegram to Agent-General, dated 11th June, 1870, and also communicated by letter.

This offer was refused by the British Australian Telegraph Company on 22nd July, and the Agent-General forwarded copies of correspondence, by which it was plainly seen that the Telegraph Company had decided on entering into an agreement with South Australia for direct lines from Port Augusta to Port Darwin, while this Government was committed to the Northern line from Port Denison to Normanton, a large portion of which had been already constructed.

Under date of 30th September, 1870, a telegram was addressed by the Chief Secretary, Adelaide, to the Colonial Secretary, Brisbane, as follows:—"British Australian Telegraph Company consent to land cable at Port Darwin, to join an overland line on terms which we are prepared to agree to; they at the same time agree to arrange with the Colonies for an alternative line. We have no objection to negotiate on equitable terms for alternative land lines, for which our deviation to the Roper is admirably adapted. What are your views on the subject? We have telegraphed to New South Wales Government; asked them to confer with you on the subject." To which the following reply was sent on 7th October:—"I have laid your telegram before Cabinet. Pending communication from New South Wales, we decline any present action. We don't understand meaning of 'deviation to the Roper.' Do you mean to come down to mouth of river, or us to connect on Stuart's track?"

To this telegram, no reply whatever has been received from the South Australian Government.

Having thus briefly reviewed the history of the negotiations, which, although originally intended for the completion of the line to Burketown to connect with the Queensland line, have been taken advantage of by the South Australian Government for the purpose of monopolising the communication, leaving to this colony the position of providing a quasi-alternative line, by a junction to the Roper, through 700 miles of country, a great portion of which is uninhabited, I would wish to point out again, that Commander Noel Osborn, en route to Queensland, called at South Australia for the apparent purpose of simply asking the consent of the Government of that colony for permission to bring a line through their territory at Port Darwin, to connect with the Queensland line at the Gulf of Carpentaria, and that while there, he was induced to omit Queensland from the negotiations, and to conclude a very different agreement with that colony from what he was originally commissioned to do, judging from the correspondence hereinbefore quoted, the inducement being, that his company would be relieved of the cost of construction and maintenance of the line from Port Darwin to Burke Town.

That the action of South Australia is fairly open to comment in this matter I submit must be apparent to every one.

The remarks of the Superintendent of Telegraphs, which were made with so much force in his report dated 10th May, 1870, and passed uncontradicted by the Superintendent of Telegraphs, Adelaide, have been endorsed

endorsed in his late report in a spirit of criticism, which it will be seen is perfectly just, and to which every important work, and more especially one which is of so much interest to the whole of the Australian Colonies, must be liable; and I cannot see that these remarks are founded on an erroneous basis, as the Chief Secretary of South Australia would seem to wish the neighboring colonies to understand in his circular, while, at the same time, he informed them that the line from Port Augusta was brought forward at the Intercolonial Conference in June, 1870, and that from the correspondence it would be seen that Queensland was permitted to join the line at the Roper, and that this Government declined to entertain the proposal. I will only add with reference to this, that the telegram, dated 7th October, 1870, which is fully given in this correspondence, shewed that this Government merely declined any present action pending communication with New South Wales, and asked for the meaning of the proposal to join at the Roper, to which no reply was given. It will be observed that the most important part of this telegram is omitted by the Chief Secretary of South Australia.

After very mature consideration I have arrived at the conclusion that it would be unwise for this colony to construct and maintain a larger extent of line than that we undertook in 1867, and I fully agree with Mr. Cracknell that a cable from Normanton to Melville Island, near Port Darwin, or, still better, to Java, would make the most, if not the only, reliable alternative line. It was on these grounds alone that it was considered expedient to have a submarine cable from Melville Island to Normanton, and for which purpose a guarantee was given in the telegram, dated 11th June, which was declined by the British-Australian Telegraph Company.

In conclusion, I would wish to quote the following arguments which were used by Mr. Todd in his report, dated 18th April, 1870, when strongly recommending the adoption of a line from Port Augusta to Port Darwin, viz.:—"That this line would secure the whole of the traffic to South Australia," while if they connected with the Queensland line at the Roper or Nicholson, they would have to divide receipts equally with Queensland; and that if they failed to accept the terms now submitted, they must be prepared to leave to Queensland the exclusive honor of having, through her own unaided enterprise and energy, afforded to the Australian Colonies the immense advantages of telegraphic communication with the whole civilized world, and that their geographical position and intelligence alike prohibited this. Comment on this is unnecessary.

I have, &c.,

THOS. L. MURRAY PRIOR,
Postmaster-General.

The Honorable the Colonial Secretary, Brisbane.

[CORR.]

Electric Telegraph Department,
Superintendent's Office,
Brisbane, 15th June, 1871.

Sir,

I have the honor, by direction, to report on a letter received from the Chief Secretary of South Australia, enclosing copy of letter addressed to the Governments of Victoria and New South Wales, and a report by the Superintendent of Telegraphs, South Australia, taking exception to the following paragraphs in my last annual report, viz.:—

"The overland line from Port Augusta will follow Stuart's track to the Roper, thence by as direct a course as possible to Port Darwin. The country this line will traverse between Lake Torrens and Newcastle Water, extending over fourteen degrees of latitude, is described as scarcely better than a desert, where little or no timber can be obtained for construction purposes, and during dry seasons is, for the most part, devoid of permanent surface water, and feed for cattle cannot be obtained. In wet seasons many localities on the route are evidently subjected to inundations, and the country generally may be considered difficult for transport of material and stores required for construction and maintenance purposes. On the other hand, the Queensland lines traverse settled country throughout; they have been severely tested in all seasons, and prove to work both regularly and well; they are better cleared and more substantially built than those in course of construction by the Government of South Australia, and, therefore, less liable to interruption. Although the most strenuous efforts are apparently being made in order to open up communication with Port Darwin by the end of the current year, at present there seems to be little prospect of the work being completed for many months after the expiration of that period. All hopes of working a line of this description with anything like regularity must, I fear, be abandoned, at any rate until the country is thoroughly opened up and permanently occupied."

"Under these circumstances, it will readily be perceived that the interests of the Australian colonists, and their correspondents throughout the world, will be best served for some time to come by extending the cable to the terminus of the Queensland system at Carpentaria,—thereby securing regular communication, as by this route the land lines in Australia traverse settled country throughout and are at all times accessible for working and repairs."

The Superintendent states that my remarks are evidently calculated to mislead, and that it is much to be regretted that, through zeal, I should have spoken so positively and disparagingly of works carried on in South Australia without first ascertaining facts. With regard to the nature of the country traversed, and for information generally as to the interior of this Continent, I have read very carefully the journals of Sturt, Stuart, Leichhardt, A. C. Gregory, and McKinlay, and have had conversations on the subject with Messrs. A. C. Gregory and Landsborough, before making the statement objected to. It is true that Stuart states, in the summary of his journal, that, with the exception of two nights during his journey across the Continent, he was never without a sufficient supply of water; but when, in the journal, he describes his return, we find him astonished at the evaporation which had taken place, and that he and members of his party were camped many nights during the journey without water, on numerous occasions had to dig into the sandy beds of water courses, and, after much labor, obtained barely sufficient for his party, although well acquainted with the greater portion of the route.

The Rev. J. E. T. Woods, F.R.G.S., in his work on the History of the Discovery and Exploration of Australia, when speaking of Stuart, says:—"He left the settled districts in January, 1862, and the early part of his journey was much delayed for want of water, and, on several occasions, very perilous advances had to be made." The same writer says, when speaking of Stuart's having crossed to the north of the Continent:—"Of the triumph thus secured to Australian discovery, it is needless to speak; no man had labored so long

"and

"and so perseveringly to obtain it. It may be doubted, indeed, whether the route thus opened will be always practicable, except in its northern part; indeed we may admit that the country between Lake Torrens and Newcastle Water is only one degree removed from a desert." Again, when speaking of Stuart's return:—"The return journey was marked throughout by a great scarcity of water. Most of the holes which they had relied upon in their outward course, were found perfectly dried up. On one occasion, the horses had to be pushed through one hundred miles of country without finding water." In another place, "Stuart was encountered by large tracts of spinifex grass and stately gum trees, apparently liable to occasional floods." Again, in speaking of the centre of the Continent:—"Apart from the arid nature of the climate, the soil is, in places, little better than a mere drift of red sand."

It is not possible, in a document of this nature, to enter fully into the subject, but full information can be obtained from the explorers' journals. It is a theory advanced by many, and it is by no means improbable, that the desert interior is at times visited by inundations, there being no apparent outlet for the heavy tropical rains which must fall in some seasons.

In the *South Australian Register* of 16th March last, some extracts from private letters were published, showing the difficulties encountered by one of their construction parties, in travelling between the Finke and Macdonnell Ranges—the great scarcity of water even in a good season, the stony and sandy nature of the country, and the scarcity of timber. Indeed, it was stated lately, in the same paper, that the contractor of the first section of 500 miles, for the last 300 miles was carting timber for poles an average distance of 260 miles.

An article was published in the *South Australian Register* of July 1st, 1870, in which some information is given relative to the nature of the work now being carried out between Port Augusta and Port Darwin. This article, which has not been contradicted, states that "the conditions and specifications under which contractors are asked to tender for the construction of the trans-continental telegraph, discloses, to some extent, the plan of operations decided upon for carrying out this great undertaking. The work to be let in six sections, the Government providing the wire and insulators." Specification, as stated therein, given below.

The specification for the line now in course of construction, and which is almost completed, between Cardwell and the mouth of the Norman River,—and, indeed, the same description would apply to the Queensland lines generally—is shown, as under, with that of South Australia, viz. :—

QUEENSLAND.

Clearing.—All timber is cleared to a width of eighty (80) feet, and any timber beyond that distance likely to endanger the line is removed.

Poles.—Poles which are of the best description of hardwood (ironbark and bloodwood being used almost exclusively), not less than five (5) inches in diameter at the top and not less than nine (9) inches in diameter at five feet from the butt, and twenty-five (25) feet in length, the top being properly hooped and the butt properly charred and tarred, and placed five (5) feet in the ground.

Number of poles per mile.—These are erected at the rate throughout of not less than twenty (20) posts to the mile, with the following modification for the line in the locality of the Norman, where suitable timber is not available, and Messrs. Oppenheimer and Co.'s patent galvanised wrought iron poles have been procured:—fifteen (15) poles to the mile, to carry one wire, and thirty (30) to the mile, to carry two or more wires. They weigh 166 lbs. each, and are 24 feet in length.

Insulators.—The insulators used are the best manufactured, and the wire is the best description made by Messrs. Johnson and Nephew.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

Clearing.—The clearing is stated as fifteen (15) feet in width.

Poles.—Poles might be either approved saplings, "twenty (20) feet in length, or square pieces of wood of the same length. That where timber might be scarce it was permitted to scarf two pieces together, the lower being of extra stoutness and not less than fourteen (14) feet long. Permission is given instead of the upper portion to use a length of strong gas piping.

Number of poles per mile.—Twenty (20) poles are the ordinary allowance for the mile; but where good material can be obtained sixteen (16) will be passed as sufficient. Three thousand iron poles nineteen (19) feet in length, and weighing twenty-eight (28) lbs. each were to be supplied. Sixteen of these are required to the mile.

"Four station buildings were to be erected."

If the specifications are compared, further comment is unnecessary.

The *South Australian Superintendent*, in his report dated April 18th, 1870, estimates the distance between Port Augusta and Port Darwin as, at the outside, 1,600 miles; three or four stations being deemed necessary, the total cost being stated as £120,000. In his report of 19th May last, the distance is stated as 1,800 miles; and that it is intended to place stations every 150 or 180 miles, nothing being said as to additional cost. The increase in the number of stations will tend to make the line more reliable, but it should be borne in mind that throughout this colony the distance between stations does not exceed sixty miles, and that therefore repairs could be more speedily effected. As regards the statement that, were it necessary or desirable, he might retort by referring in detail to the lengthened interruptions occasioned by floods on the Queensland lines, and going on to refer to the slow progress made with the Cardwell and Nermanton section. Early in last year, before the crossing at the Burdekin River was completed (owing to supply of suitable material for spanning this river not being obtainable in the colonies) we were visited with a flood and hurricane, which carried away the temporary wire; but since that time, the permanent line has been erected, and as an additional precaution a cable has been trenched across the bed of that river, to be made use of in case of accident. There is, therefore, no reason to fear a similar interruption. Repairs could have been effected much earlier, but it was not thought necessary to incur expense on a line carrying a small amount of business. As to the slow progress on the Gulf section, communication could have been established some time since, had it been necessary to do so. There is no great reason why the work should be hurried; up to the present, we have not arranged with anyone beyond the colony to complete the line within a certain time, and the whole work, line and stations, is being properly and substantially carried out; had the work been hurried, it would have cost a much larger sum, and might not have been so well performed.

Under favorable circumstances it may be possible for South Australia to stretch a temporary line across the continent by the end of the current year ; but building a permanent line is a different matter, and there is little prospect of the work being completed for many months after the expiration of that period.

It was not my intention to disparage the work now being carried out by the South Australian department, which all must admit shows energy and enterprise ; my only endeavor was to clearly point out, that, having the best of materials at our hand,—as with the exception of the distance near the Gulf, for which iron poles have been procured, the timber throughout is excellent ; and passing through a suitable and settled country, the transit of material and stores being regularly provided for, and the stations placed at short distances—we had constructed a line of better material and were able to maintain it in a greater state of efficiency than could be practicable on a route such as Stuart's track. The Superintendent of the South Australian Department states that the greater part of the Queensland lines for a considerable distance south of Cardwell traverse unoccupied country ; it is almost unnecessary for me to inform you that such is not the case, as the Queensland lines traverse settled country throughout. He also states that their direct line will be worked under more favorable climatic conditions than the lines of this colony. We have never experienced any difficulty in working our lines, and for telegraphic purposes, a climate could not be more favorable than that of Queensland.

The action taken by the South Australian Government in this matter is much to be regretted, as telegraphic communication with India and Europe might easily have been opened up, *via* the Eastern lines, by the present date ; and I think that no time should be lost in communicating with the Governments of New South Wales, Victoria, and Tasmania, as to the advisability of taking steps to secure, without delay, communication by submarine cable between the Norman River and Java, in which case the colonies generally would not suffer inconvenience in the event of interruption on the South Australian Overland Line.

I have, &c.,

W. J. CRACKNELL,

Superintendent of Electric Telegraphs.

The Honorable the Postmaster-General.

[Price, 5s.]