

Undoubtedly the most interesting desert I crossed was the Nullarbor Plain in the Centre of Australia. *Nullus arbor* = No tree, accurately describes this vast 1/4 million square kilometer limestone and dolomite plateau, 650 km from east to west and 400 km from south to north. It was first crossed in 1841 by the British colonial administrator, John Eyre. Flat, covered with small stones, the only vegetation is salt bush and blue bush, less than 1 m high.

There are no human habitations in the Nullarbor, and without the Transcontinental Railway, built 1912-1917, only a telegraph line and the recent Eyre Highway, join the East of Australia with its West. The construction of the railway line was as heroic an enterprise as that of the Suez Canal and of equal importance for political, economic and strategic reasons. Politically it was the first great work of the Australian Federation (now Commonwealth) founded in 1901, and for strategic reasons Kitchener pointed out that without an east-west link no defence of the Continent would be possible. David Burke has written an excellent account *Road through the Wilderness* (NSW University Press, 1991) of the building of this vital rail line against all obstructions, by man or by nature. The railway has the longest stretch of straight railroad track in the world, 475 km, which runs without any curve east—west.

I was fortunate to cross the Nullarbor in the days when locomotion was by steam and not by modern diesel-electric air-conditioned trains. It was winter time, the temperatures moderate, and my wife and I could experience the anachronism of having to change trains, because different gauges existed then in Victoria, on the Transcontinental and in West Australia. Between Melbourne and Perth, watches had to be changed twice, for two time zones.

Because coal and water had to be replenished frequently for the locomotives, depots were established about every 50 km, and our train stopped at many of these. Most had aboriginal names, like Woocalla (crow), Coondambo (Kangaroo rat), Ooldea (meeting place with water) and Naretha (salt) to give a few examples. At one depot an aboriginal came close to our window and seeing me, burst out laughing, pointing to my moustache which was apparently new to him. It took three days and four nights from Melbourne to Perth.

The most astonishing observation was the glistening path on both sides of the rail track which accompanied our journey. I got out at one depot and found nothing else than thousands and thousands of broken beer bottles, thrown out of the windows. What will archaeologists say, in a thousand years, when they discover hundreds of kilometers of these straight east-west lines of silicone glass when rails and wooden sleepers had disappeared long ago? Perhaps their speculations will dwell on guide paths for Sun-worshippers?

See also Woomera Title 132.