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These resources were created by Megg Kelham B.A. (Hons) Dip Ed ACPHA PHA (NT) for the Collaborative Museums Education Project funded by the Regional Museums Grants Support Programme, Museum and Art Gallery NT.

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Introduction

The story of ‘Flynn of the Inland’ and how he founded the world’s first flying doctor service, can be found in many places - in film, audio, print and on the web. Google ‘John Flynn – Flying Doctor’ and you will be overwhelmed by choice.

This web site does not repeat what already exists.

Rather it introduces you to a less well known, but equally important, Flynn – to Flynn the map maker, photographer, journalist, nationalist and passionate advocate for what he called the Australian Inland and we now call the Outback.

Our story is told through the history of:

- the organisation Flynn founded – Flynn’s A.I.M.
- Alice Springs, the town which lies at the heart of Flynn’s beloved Inland and the town Flynn chose as his final resting place.
- the controversies relating to Flynn’s work and burial place

Our aim is to encourage you now, or at some time in the future, to visit the Australian Inland and see some of its treasures – natural and man made - for yourself. If you already live here then you already know and we hope this will encourage you to visit some of the sites on The Flynn Trail.

The materials are in three parts

- The Story - three .pdf booklets, researched by a professional historian, designed for you to read on-line or print and take on your imagined or real travels.
- The Collection - copies of the photographic, document and object images on which the story is based. Use this image bank to create your own learning activities. Contextual and significance information relevant to the collection are to be found in the texts.
- Trail Activities – divided into things to do, things to read and things to listen to. These activities are for people of all ages and may be done whether or not you visit the Flynn Trail. Activities have been filed according to the minimum age needed to undertake a task. So please look in all files if you are over 15. The aim of these activities is to stimulate conversation between adults and kids, strangers and friends, trail site staff and visitors, locals and tourists rather than to get the ‘right’ answer.

This version is still a work in progress. Critical feedback welcome. Please email to meggkel@yahoo.com and check www.flynntrail.org.au for updates.

Welcome to the Flynn Trail
Following in Flynn’s Footsteps

Part 1: Flynn’s A.I.M. by Megg Kelham
Knowledge of the Australian Outback was, in Flynn’s opinion, an essential feature of Australian identity, as the back cover of Flynn’s 1927 Inlander shows. It was a point of view, however, that many Australians needed to be convinced about. Collection Adelaide House
In 1912, the Rev John Flynn, a 31-year-old Victorian minister in the Presbyterian Church, travelled to Darwin to investigate the spiritual needs of the Northern Territory. The non-Aboriginal population was less than 3,500. Of these only 125 were women.

In Darwin, Flynn talked to locals, took photographs, drew maps, collected statistics and assessed the economic potential of what most Australians then regarded as their ‘back door’.

Despite its small population and lack of economic prospects, Flynn argued that…

*The failure of the Church, as a whole, to reach our outposts, is our shame. I am convinced that never can health be manifested fully in our home congregations until faithfulness marks our frontier policy.*

John Flynn, *Northern Territory and Central Australia, A Call to the Church*, 1912

Flynn’s ‘hands on’ approach to work had him travel thousands of kilometres every year. This map of his early travels is taken from his 1914 superintendent’s report, which can be found in the Alice Springs Collection - Neville Shute Library, Alice Springs.

… The Territory can be established as a rich land only by experts. It is no place for primitive settlers. In any case, much of the country is really poor.

… Enough has been said now, perhaps, to show that in the Interior the population is neither numerous nor rich, and that the future is likely to prove very much the same as the present, for many years at least.

Extract from Flynn, *Northern Territory and Central Australia: A Call to the Church*, 1912
Even though Flynn had been asked only to report on the Northern Territory, he came up with a plan for providing Christian ministry to the whole of remote Australia.

Flynn argued that the Inland’s tyranny of distance, which contributed to the lack of services in Australia’s heart, could only be conquered if all the sparsely populated parts of Australia were ‘unified under one management’. [Flynn 1924]

Flynn’s administrative plans recognised the Inland’s ‘commercial operation zones’ rather than the arbitrarily constructed political borders of the newly created Australian nation.

I have taken the liberty of adding an appendix for which no request had been made. I do so partly because the needs of our interior as a whole are so similar to those of the Northern Territory that combining all should tend towards efficiency, and partly because the interests are so interwoven that it would be foolish to attempt the furthering of one without the other

…if the different calls for assistance are not harmonised they are certain to clash, with the result of general weakness, and damage in particular to any effort in the Northern Territory …

Flynn, Northern Territory and Central Australia, A Call to the Church, 1912

I would suggest that the whole of our arid Interior, along with the scantily-populated bush lands to the north and nor’west of the continent become a special area (with the approval of the State Assemblies concerned) to be under the direct control of your Board …

Roughly speaking, such an area may be defined as that part of Australia receiving less that 10 inches of rain per year, and then including all the lands lying directly north; for the latter areas are so peculiar in character and position that closer settlement on any large scale is possibly far distant yet. i.e. HALF AUSTRALIA.

Flynn, 1912
Flynn’s report also acknowledged that Inlanders were, by and large, uninterested in religion. As one of his more experienced colleagues put it:

The odds against religion are so heavy that unless God works miracles as great as making deaf men hear and dead men live, this mission to the Far North is hopeless and ridiculous.

Rev Baldwin, as cited by Rudolph, Ivan, *John Flynn of Flying Doctors and Frontiers Faith* Dov, page 41

Never one to shrink from a challenge, Flynn took inspiration from the work of Dr William Grenfell, a medical missionary in the cold country of Canadian Labrador, who advised:

“When you set out to commend your Gospel to men who do not particularly want it, there is only one way to go about it – to do something for them that they will be sure to understand.”

Cited by Flynn, 1912

Flynn’s AIM, one of the A.I.M.’s longest serving patrol padres, was, like Flynn, a passionate photographer. His photo collection at the Old Timer’s Traeger Museum captures some of the unique

There is no other region on earth of temperate climate, where Anglo-Saxons can live a free life comparable with that now experienced in our own “Desert”. But, if the influence of that life is to leaven the whole lump of our young Nation, much attention must be given to detail. Those living out there must be remembered always, and they must be made to feel always that they are remembered; otherwise there is grave danger of their personal efficiency being impaired, or of their retreating in disgust. Indeed, already, for the last thirty years our “Insiders” have been steadily retreating.

*Flynn, The Inlander* 1924 p93

Ron Brown worked in the Territory as a policeman from 1939-1952

Extract from *Brown, Ron and Studdy-Clift, Pat Bush Justice* 1990 Hesperian Press

The law is different in isolated areas by reason of the fact that the people are different. They have to be, to venture into the Red Heart. They have a tenacity of purpose, which produces a species who can easily become a law unto themselves.
Flynn argued that what Inlanders wanted was practical help with life’s daily tasks like cutting hair, pulling teeth, branding cattle and sinking wells. Women needed safe child birth and help educating their children at home. All Inlanders needed ‘bright books and magazines’, occasional nursing care, and the knowledge that the majority of coast hugging Australians cared for them.

Rather than seeking Christian conversion Flynn aimed

… to make every isolated Presbyterian feel that the Old Kirk is in touch with him; to make every isolated Christian feel that the Church is not forgetting him; and to make every isolated sinner feel that, so far as the Church represents the love of God, he is not beyond the reach of that mystic influence.

Flynn, John letter to Fred McKay, 5th September 1935.

Flynn wanted to do ‘something which would benefit the community at large’. [Flynn 1924].

Love of reading among bush men is a great factor which must be won to our cause in any serious campaign.

John Flynn, Northern Territory and Central Australia, A Call to the Church, 1912

Bushman’s love of reading is evident in this letter of gratitude sent to Flynn by miners from Hatch’s Creek, a once small but vibrant mining community near Alice Springs.

NLA_MS5574_Box167_Folder 1
Impressed by Flynn’s innovatively illustrated report, the Presbyterian Church took ‘the boldest, most ambitious and most necessary undertaking ever contemplated’ and created the somewhat oddly named Australian Inland Mission, reputed to be the largest parish in the world.

As Flynn made clear in the above extract from the 1920-1921 edition of The Inlander, the formation of the Australian Inland Mission was only possible because the Presbyterian Churches had, like the Australian states, nationalised in 1901. Arguably it is easier for private institutions like the Presbyterian Church to re-arrange their administration than it is for governments.

This A.I.M. Leaflet compares Australia to Europe, as a way of illustrating its size. It was created for an Australian not a European audience. Most Australians, then as now, look outward rather than inward when thinking about leaving home. NLA MS3288 Box 14
The Church put Flynn in charge and, for better or worse, gave him responsibility for raising the funds needed to pay for his Inland work.

The smallness of the Inland population and the unwillingness of governments to finance the economically unpromising, made it practically impossible for Flynn's parishioners to raise sufficient funds themselves. So Flynn focussed his attention on obtaining financial and moral support from 'sympathisers in the more populous Australian states'.

Flynn’s 1912 report was so readable that the church published and sold it to the general public. The back cover (above) included several pages of perforated donation slips enabling ordinary Australians to contribute to Flynn’s pioneering work. Collection Adelaide House.
An ardent nationalist, persuasive public speaker and great publicist, Flynn set about convincing Australians that their unique identity was to be found in the interior of their continent rather than overseas.

Flynn and his ‘mob’ - the padres, nurses, doctors and volunteers who eventually made up the staff of the A.I.M. gave thousands of public lectures around the country.

Using hand coloured photographs, they showed the beauty of the Australian Inland to that vast majority of Australians who knew nothing about it and were unlikely to see it themselves.

Work of Superintendent Sep 1912 to Sep 1914

1913-
Jan 5 Preached at evening service at North Melbourne
6-11 At A.S.C.U. Camp Conference, Browns River, Tasmania. Several students lead into deep interest.
12 Sunday in Hobart: 11 am, Chalmer’s Church; 3p.m. Men’s Meeting St John’s; 7pm Student’s meeting at St John’s shared with Rev F. Paton
17 Addressed Public Meeting at Noorat, Victoria
18 Addressed Young Men’s Meeting at Noorat
19 Sunday: 11, Noorat 2 Glenormiston 9 Noorat

Flynn, Superintendent’s Report, 1914

A typical month in the life of John Flynn shows that he spent more time speaking at public meetings than delivering sermons. This worried some of his more traditional church colleagues.
Taking, what for a preacher was ‘the very risky experiment of paper power - the appeal of print instead of oratory’ [Flynn 1914]

Flynn produced ‘The Inlander’, a pictorial journal which informed coastal Australians about the Inland, and Inlanders about themselves.

The Inlander also provided a place for all Australians to exchange ideas about how to solve Inland problems as well as to financially assist with their implementation.

Thousands of ordinary Australians put their hands in their pockets to help.

The Inland Brigade

Sunshine Church
Juvenile Group of Ten Members
Leader: William Sunbeam
13 Go-Ahead Road
Sunshine

Six Shillings and sixpence
August 1st 1915

The Inlander Vol 3
Flynn’s early attempts to staff and finance his Inland work were made almost impossible by the outbreak of the second World War, as money and people -including some of his small band of nurses and padres - left Australia for the battlefields of Europe.

Flynn devoted a 1915 edition of The Inlander to discussion of Australia’s Aboriginal population. Declaring the ‘plight of fringe dwellers … a blot on Australia’ Flynn suggested that ‘We who so cheerfully sent a cheque for £100,000 to Belgium to help a people pushed out of their own inheritance by foreigners—surely we must just as cheerfully do something for those whom we clean-handed people have dispossessed in the interests of superior culture’.

Ever the optimist, Flynn chose to view the ‘many disappointments’ of the early years ‘as a preliminary experiment’ which enabled him ‘to discover lines on which a permanent – and adequate’ mission ‘might be built up’. (Flynn 1924). Flynn’s dreams of contributing to the community at large grew bigger, not smaller.

Under Flynn’s leadership, the A.I.M. embarked on the challenging journey of discovering how the new war-forged air and radio technologies could be used to provide emergency medical care to Australia’s remotest citizens, and so encourage Inland population growth.

Flynn’s dreams of an aerial medical service came before technologies enabling them, had been invented. Indeed the AIM funded communications revolution on which the service was based. This map showing how planes could service Inland Australia better than railways or roads was published on the back page of The Inlander in 1921. Collection Adelaide House

The first thing to do in any effort to uplift the tone of bush life is to give women a sense of security; in other words to make child-bearing comparatively safe at the outposts. Then brave men will not hesitate to lead partners farther back and the presence of white women and children in greater numbers will sweeten the whole life.

Flynn, John 1912 A Call to the Church p54

Elimination of Dread

Flying Doctors, while merely ‘standing by’ at a few stations strategically placed, would eliminate dread of what might happen – a dread which does infinitely more harm to frontier development than actual sickness and accident.

Flynn, John The Inlander 1920-1921
With financial support from coastal Australians, who responded enthusiastically to Flynn’s insistence that what happened Inland was their financial and moral responsibility, the A.I.M. grew in size and services as it survived the Great Depression, a second World War and several crippling droughts.

Seated on the verandah of a little homestead tucked away in the hills of Inland Australia, the Patrol Padre entered into the conversation which always characterised these after-upper hours. The station-manager, his wife, the bookkeeper, and the head stockman, made up the personnel of the little party.

It had been a hot, trying day, and now that the dust storm had eased, and the refreshing coolness of the night air had descended upon them, it was in a peaceful and friendly atmosphere that the conversation continued.

The Padre was tired, for he had worked all day servicing the pedal transceiver, that remarkable little instrument which meant so much to these lonely people, and which had in the past, and may at any time in the future, be a means of saving precious human life. The two young men, both of whom had been baptised by the Padre during previous visits, had gone to bed. Before they retired, however, the usual family worship had been held, followed by bedtime stories. The Padre lounged back in a huge homemade squatter’s chair, and beyond contributing an occasional sentence or two, listened to what these Inlanders had to say.

The bookkeeper retold the story of how his life had been saved three years before when he suffered from acute appendicitis. The manager told of twelve weeks spent in an A.I.M. nursing home with a compound fracture of the leg. The head stockman was told in his praise of the literature service of the A.I.M. and proudly mentioned the fact that it was seldom now that his men on the run were without books or magazines to read. It was the manager’s wife, however, who gave the most romantic contribution when she began to tell the story, well-known in these parts, of how the A.I.M. sister of five years before, had travelled 214 miles over flooded rivers and swollen creeks to come to her aid when little John, the baby of the family, had been ushered into the world. The story of that hazardous trip, although familiar enough to the Padre, strangely affected the Padre’s big heart. He knew what this brave woman said was only too true; if that Sister had failed to get through on that occasion the story would have been a different and sadder one. But what affected the Padre most of all and drove him into complete silence was the concluding statement made by the manager’s wife when she said: “PADRE, IF EVER THE A.I.M. GIVES UP OUT HERE, MY HUSBAND, MY CHILDREN, AND I, WOULD PACK UP AND LEAVE.”

Very soon “good-nights” were said, and each one made off to their respective beds. The Padre spent a restless night, for that sentence constantly recurred to him, “If ever the A.I.M. gives up!” Never! he said to himself again and again. “It shall never be—the A.I.M. must not give up!”

That sentence is the keynote of this appeal. Shall this great work continue?

Present conditions make it increasingly difficult to carry on and yet it is unthinkable that we should have to close down any one of our centres—they are all most necessary.

The Board is facing serious financial difficulty—Faith in God has been the motto of the A.I.M. since its foundation, and that faith keeps it going. We need help, and need it badly, yet we believe that our friends will not let us down.

Will you make one to see if the words of that brave little Inland woman never come true! WILL YOU STAND BEHIND US NOW with your gifts, your prayers, and your encouragement? They are urgently needed.

AIM Leaflet, probably written during the Great Depression of the 1930s. NLA MS5574 Box 242
Under Flynn’s leadership the A.I.M:

- invented the world’s first affordable amateur operated wireless radio
- established the world’s first aerial ambulance service and school of the air
- built nursing hostels in communities Australian governments considered too small to service
- gave seaside holidays to Inland children
- and, established an aged care facility for a small group of eccentric ‘old timers’ with a distaste for civilized life.

Attending the A.I.M’s beachside camps was often the first time Inland children saw the sea. NLA MS5574_Box 241

This pictorial history of the pedal radio revolution was published in a commemorative edition of The Inlander in 1963 [collection Adelaide House]. The radio hut from which the first successful radio message was sent (pictured top right), still exists at the back of Adelaide House. A more detailed history can be found in the Royal Flying Doctor Service museum, Alice Springs.
Though a Christian mission, the A.I.M built hospitals not churches, employed more nurses than ministers and those ministers spent more time installing pedal radios than delivering sermons. The AIM also distributed more novels than bibles.

Flynn’s practical Christianity was criticised by some of his more traditional Church colleagues, who thought he was abandoning the spiritual.

However, for most Australians, the A.I.M’s achievements made Flynn a legend in his own lifetime and earned him respect from god-less and god-loving Inlanders alike.

Australia’s post war Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, called Flynn’s achievements the ‘greatest single contribution to the settlement of Australia’.

Or in the words of one old Inlander, Flynn ‘put hobbles on the bush’.

Famous Australian author Jeannie Gunn was not alone when she expressed her deep gratitude to Flynn for his Inland work in this personally autographed copy of ‘We of the Never Never’. NLA MS3288 Box 16
This letter was written shortly after the author’s daughter became the first baby born at the A.I.M.’s Alice Springs Hostel, now Adelaide House. Mr Kerr lived at Delny Station near Arltunga west of Alice Springs. A.M.S. stands for Aerial Medical Service, the first name given to what is now called the Royal Flying Doctor service. NLA MS3288 Box 4
Flynn’s friends claimed that none of the A.I.M.’s achievements could have happened without him.

Flynn himself claimed that none of what he did could have happened without his friends! He also insisted that, if he hadn’t done it, someone else would.

The organisational structure of the Australian Inland Mission, which placed Australia’s ‘meagre and scattered’ population in one administrative unit and forged links between them and Australia’s populated coastal fringe, was the foundation stone on which Flynn and his friends were able to build their Inland revolution.

‘In an unprecedented way such success as has been attained … has been due to the enthusiasm of individuals. Instead of waiting for some official to come along, these enthusiasts – scattered all over the Commonwealth – have talked eloquently and at length to audiences of ones and twos. They have seldom asked for money – though on occasions they can do that fairly pointedly. Mostly it has been pure enthusiasm which has proved contagious, and the charmed audience has requested help in doing his or her bit. The audience got the help – and in due course we got the cheque.

But enthusiasm is more essential than money. By enthusiasm alone – (is it not just love in action?) can we get the highly competent nurses and ministers whom we need: workers who are eagerly sought for important posts in cities – and who turn hearts, faces and steps westward or northward, to be where Australia’s Destiny is being worked out?

John Flynn, The Inlander 1924

The Reverend John Flynn

I do ask people to bear with me, as I find it impossible to speak about men like Flynn without showing my great admiration and becoming somewhat sentimental.

John Flynn was a large man, with broad shoulders, whose features bore the stamp of Scotland. Intensely thoughtful, he looked at you with deep blue eyes, from beneath arched brows.

Once he reached a decision, he became quite dogmatic. Always strictly upright in his mental and moral outlook, without a mean bone in his body. I picture him thinking, “How can I rectify this problem”.

Flynn was a strange mixture, a realist and an idealist, but most of all, a visionary whose great dream was his “mantle of safety”. No one could deny his dogged perseverance, courage and tough mental stamina, no matter the cost. If only he could return now, to see his vision developed and expanded here and elsewhere.

I count myself blessed for not only knowing this outback hero, but also for experiencing his help, when it was most needed.

Extract from Brown, Ron and Studdy-Clift, Pat Bush Justice 1990 Hesperian Press

Ron Brown was a Territory policeman in the 1940s and ‘50s.
This .pdf is the first of three booklets created by Megg Kelham for the Collaborative Museums Education Project funded by the Regional Museums Grants Support Programme, Museum and Art Gallery NT.

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It is our sincere hope that this booklet will encourage you to visit the attractions on The Flynn Trail:
The Old Timers Traeger Museum
Adelaide House
The John Flynn Memorial Church
Flynn’s Grave
The Fred McKay Museum, St Philip’s College
The Royal Flying Doctor Service
The School of the Air

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These photos of Alice Springs which were taken by Flynn in 1926 and 1934 show the rapid economic growth which came to Alice Springs after the railway came to town.
John Flynn visited Alice Springs for the first time in the summer of 1913. He travelled by camel from the railhead at Oodnadatta in the company of a Dutchman called Texas, who was reputed to have fled to Central Australia after his wife was murdered following gun running activities in New South Wales.

Texas spent most of the journey with his nose ‘lost in a book’, leaving Flynn to experience the journey in relative solitude.

I remember a remark made by my companion which appealed to me because I was born [sic] tired. It was by far our longest day. The calves were sulking, the dog was suffering from the intense heat, the old cow-camels sulked most effectively in sympathy with their calves and broke nose lines more times than could be numbered. Texas was too true a bushman to break or even injure their heads, but I also fear he must have felt fit to break all Ten Commandments at one stroke. We had started before eight in the morning and, with a short break at noon, had gone on all through the afternoon. Pup sweltered under a splendid canopy of shade which his master had built for him on top of one of the packs, and we sweltered under our hats.

About sundown we ‘sat down’ the camels, boiled the quart-pots, and had our evening meal. Then Texas thoughtfully rolled a cigarette, while I lit a pipe, and in most artistic manner posed myself in recline on the soft red sand, without intruding on one clump of Spinifex. The temperature had already fallen to a delightful coolness, and the stars began to whisper of content.

At last I spoke.

“I reckon this is the best part of the day. I think the best time is when you’ve had your tea, when all your work for the day is done, and you lie back luxuriously and enjoy a quiet smoke.”

Texas replied. “Do you? I don’t. I reckon the best time is when you’ve had your tea, and you’ve still got a few more miles to go and finish your day’s stage, and you light your pipe and have a nice quiet smoke – and you don’t go on.

We studied problems in silence for quarter of an hour, then threw tucker bags into packbags again, called on the camels to go forward and travelled on till after midnight.

Flynn, The Inlander, 1913.

1913 VISIT TO SOUTH AND CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Jan 22 Started for Adelaide
23 Hearty meeting of four Churches combined re East-West Railway movement
26 Sunday at Port Augusta. Preached twice.
29 Started for Beltana, Oodnadatta and Alice Springs, on general tour of inspection re Central Australia. Good reception among residents. Reports since published in Inlander. Returned to Adelaide on March 22nd.
Mar 23 – Sunday Preached at Goodwood and Woodville
26 Returned to Melbourne: began preparing for lecturing tour over eastern States.

Extract from ‘appendix to Flynn’s 1914 Superintendent’s report to the Board of the A.I.M.'
Alice Springs, or Stuart as it was then officially called, had been founded 25 years earlier by the Government of South Australia, as a service centre for an ill-fated ‘ruby’ rush.

The ‘rubies’ turned out to be garnets, a fact Flynn uncharacteristically appears not to have unearthed during his first visit.

Alice Springs survived when gold was found at nearby Arltunga. With an adult European population of less than 18 in 1913, Alice could, Flynn thought, only be described as an ‘approach’ to a township and not ‘as a township altogether’. [Flynn 1912]

Flynn, like many of his contemporaries, thought that British claims to ownership of the Australian continent could only be legitimately substantiated through occupation by settlement. As his commentary to this map shows, he regarded the slowness of inland settlement as a problem which needed to be solved. Flynn’s maps often compared the size of his inland parish to Victoria, his home state. Map from Flynn’s 1914 Superintendent’s Report

Seventy miles east gold is found. There Arltunga has had its rise and decline … The mortality among the miners has been rather severe owing to the awkward nature of the country and crude methods of mining. What the ultimate worth of these fields is must be left to the future to decide …

The enterprise of mining men is sublime. Would that some of them would turn churchwards, and bring their to-the-uttermost methods with them.

Small rubies are found in abundance in these parts, but somehow they are not valued highly. Perhaps that is because they are Australian. Sentimental associations seem to matter with precious stones …

Seventy miles west of Alice Springs is Hermannsburg … a mission station for the blacks founded over 20 years ago … After years of work some good results have been attained, but isolation and loss of time in travel have been much against continuity of policy and fuller success. Worse still, there is no local market … thus profitable ventures are confined to cattle-raising, in which it is impossible to find employment for all …

Pastoralists are very few, though they have big holdings according to southern ideas …

Flynn, John The Inlander Vol 1 No1 1913
Despite Alice’s smallness, Flynn was impressed by the hospitality of a government officer, most probably sergeant Stott, with whom he spent ‘a good part of the first evening … on a very comfortable lounge chair, with a very good cigar, and in sound of a pianola, which gave us very good music both old and new’. [Flynn, 1913 p12]

‘Alice Springs’ prepares one for something pleasant, and pleasant that part of the world is to an Inlander. Those folk who expect babbling brooks at springs, murmuring streams at rivers, snow-clad heights in ranges, and English meadows in Australia, will never altogether approve of Alice Springs and Macdonnell (sic) Ranges. Well they can stay away…

We would prefer to have MacDonnell Ranges many times as high, but as that is out of the question at this late date, we must make the most of them as they are … very bold in outline …

The Gaps in these ranges are peculiar. Every few miles you find one, a great cleavage from top to base of the range where the creek comes through…

Excerpts from Flynn, John The Inlander Vol 1 No1 1913 pp10-16

Flynn’s slightly quixotic first impressions of Alice’s beauty betray his upbringing in greener, more southern climes.

The longer Flynn travelled Inland, the less unambiguously appreciative of her charms he became.

Seen in the early morning, or at eventide, the panorama of the MacDonnell Ranges… is glorious.

Flynn, The Inlander September 1927

We must not hope for too much for this country with a rainfall under eleven inches … Neither must we sneer at this land because it compares so unfavourably with the coastal fringe …

Flynn, John The Inlander Vol 1 No1 1913

Temple Bar– ten miles south west of Alice Springs. Flynn could see its beauty long before many other European Australians. Compare, for instance, Jean Finlayson’s description on page 9 of this book. John Flynn, magic lantern slide, NLA 24615577
Flynn’s visit took place when Australians, most of whom had neither time or money for travel, were engaged in fervent national debate about the Inland’s economic potential.

For some, Australia’s interior was a ‘dead heart’, a barren wasteland recently described by one American journalist as ‘2 million square miles of Mars-like terrain encompassing most of Australia’s interior beyond the coastal cities.’ [Benesch, Peter ‘The Flying Australian Altruist’ Investors Business Daily Dec 29, 2008]

For others, the vast acres of sparsely inhabited land could be transformed – through the miracle of irrigation - into a thriving food bowl capable of supporting between one and five hundred million people.

Griffith Taylor, the pioneering Australian geographer who challenged this engineering dream by calling Australia’s Inland a ‘desert’ incurred the wrath of outraged Australian nationalism and took a job overseas.

What a wonderful place is Central Australia. “Finest pastoral country in Australia!” says one. “Desert” says another.

I would rather let somebody else speak, for utterance is certain to cause trouble with somebody somewhere. What a pity one could not always lurch along in silence on top of a patient camel, with a good book, a full waterbag, no hearers and no critics.

Here, however is a doctrine to which very many will agree, or have already agreed. Central Australia is the core of a big whole and it needs to be bored through; bored through with a railway. Then we can begin to talk about ‘Our Country’.

Now we ought really to say “Our Scraps of Country”.

It must be remembered, however, that the extent to which a country is to be ‘occupied’ depends on its capacity. There is much confusion of thought on this subject, for it is generally discussed away from facts. Perhaps the time for Australia to be judged is not yet arrived; for, by the standards used to condemn us, which of the other nations shall stand?

Flynn, John The Inlander, New Series, No. 1 September 1924 p 21

The Inlander: A Quarterly Magazine dealing with National Interests from the Outbacker’s Point of View 1913
DESSERT AND DESTINY

For the purpose of this article, ‘Desert’ is to be interpreted as ‘A large expanse of country in which one can do almost anything except lose one’s self in a crowd.’

In spite of variation in detail, impartial students seem to agree that a large portion of Australia must be sparsely occupied by human beings. There will be pastoralists, and mining communities; also, in picked sections, colonies of farmers engaged in raising special crops; but not continuously intense settlement. The portion in question extends from somewhere north of Geraldton, to the neighbourhood of Broome, eastward to somewhere about Bourke and Bourke.

On this area, for most of the year, the sun smites hard; rain comes at irregular intervals, and individual falls are generally either too scanty or too copious for satisfactory agriculture of ordinary character. Many people become either angry or mournful when these facts are pointed out to them. Is there cause for alarm or for lasting regret? …

Our “Desert” dominates Australia in a physical way, as surely as the furnace dominates a hothouse. Do men call the furnace bad names because mosses and orchids fail to thrive within its maw? Is it possible that our “Desert” exerts influences far more subtle than the above? And is it probable that, in days to come, these deeper influences will operate in far greater degree?

We believe so. There is something vaster and finer than millions of tons of wheat, or shiploads of wool and cotton, however necessary and valuable these may be; something overlooked by those restless folk who never hear of wide open spaces of earth without itching to pour in more millions of human beings, until every mile of its area vibrates with the roar of traffic; viz., distinctive character in the Spirit of Man.

It goes without saying that we Australians believe that we possess a distinctive character, and impartial observers in other countries bear witness that this belief is amply justified. What is it? Surely it is INDIVIDUALITY. …

There are many who fear, and not without cause, that even now thousands of our Australians-born are failing to acquire outstanding qualities which marked their predecessors – sturdy individuality, allied to a wonderful faculty for comradeship of the spontaneous order, i.e. based on the mere fact of having been thrown together by circumstance, rather than on having been properly ‘introduced’. …

For over a generation, ever so many of our people have been turning their backs on Australia, huddling themselves in capital cities on the edge, with their faces and ears set to catch the models of frocks and cars and songs and sentiments of every country but their own.

There is much to be said for a generation which diverts its attention to customs and performances of other lands, provided it eventually gets back to its own bit of earth to build still better, instead of lingering on and on in paltry limitations.

But can strong individuality be nurtured in a generation of strap hangers? Can the virtue of mutual helpfulness be keen where kerb-stones breed parasites? The city man who is to do anything MUST acquire strongly the habit of eluding his neighbour, even though that habit should constitute a danger to his soul.

Truly, in areas where every corner is fast filling to saturation point, the tendencies of life are inexorable. What shall it profit a Nation if it gain hundreds of millions of people – and take to the game of Catch-as-catch-can?

Wherefore, it seems, the Master Architect has provided vast oceans and ‘desserts’, and arctic region, in order that the human salt of nations might never lose their saviour. …

Out of such ‘deserted’ regions emerge those who provide the greater part of inspiration for mankind. Take a tally of your favourite writers; of the speakers whose words linger longest in your memory. Where did they find their faculties?
Through the lens of Flynn’s nationalism, Alice’s location in ‘the very middle of the middle of our continent’ [Flynn, 1915], ‘surely the climax of Inland’ [Flynn 1920], was far more important than the smallness of its population, aridity of its soils or lack of economic prospects.

In Flynn’s mind, Alice Springs was ‘the Centre of our National Home’ [Flynn 1927], the flagship of his Inland work.

Though Alice severely tested the practicality of Flynn’s dreams, his love for her never changed. Flynn chose Alice, the town where the ‘absurd’ can be found, as his final resting place.

Fred McKay, who succeeded Flynn as head of the A.I.M. at Flynn’s Grave circa 1955. photo NLA pic 24314756

This hand painted magic lantern slide of Simpson’s Gap reflects appears to have been painted by someone who has never been to central Australia. The rocks are grey, rather than red. Indeed, until you have been to red soil country, its hard to believe that it really exists. NLA pic an 24230060
Flynn’s first challenge in establishing professional medical facilities in Alice Springs was convincing his supporters that the costs associated with placing a nurse in a ‘town’ with such a small population were justified.

His second was finding a nurse willing to work in isolation.

Those on the look out for the “absurd” may find it at Alice Springs. On the face of it the position is somewhat strange. We give a photo here of the ‘Town Picnic’ in that very remote outpost, a picnic held many years ago to be sure, but the population of the township is made up to-day of a very similar group.

A nurse for so few!

But why not? We are apt to be erratic in our obedience to convention, and it has been the custom to demand a big human “turnover” for a nurse. Surely this demand is rather artificial.

In the first place we could quote quite a number of instances of women who devote their whole time and attention, practically, to the care of a little group consisting of not more than one man and thirteen children. Some are rather fully occupied caring for a group of only three or four, and even that with the assistance of a maid. So much for the domestic question – the eternal question of providing food and raiment.

Flynn, John The Inlander Volume 3 Third Quarter 1915 p123-126

The back cover of The Inlander Volume Three No. 2 1916.
Following in Flynn’s Footsteps Part 2: Flynn’s Alice © Megg Kelham 2010

This is the day on which we are to arrive in Alice Springs; we have been on the road for nine days. We are full of expectation.

The “gap” in the range…… is certainly beautiful …. as are the hills … to the North. About two miles further on there lies the little settlement of Alice Springs.

This time … is not favourable for a first sight of this place as the country is in the midst of a drought with all the ugliness and discomfort that a drought can bring – dust flies and dying stock.

I had been told much about the beauty of this place and felt a keen disappointment….. Nor was I ever to see those Ranges and country at their best as the drought lasted till after my departure eleven months later ….

What met my eye on passing through the beautiful gap was a dirty sandy flat …. a well and trough for watering stock; a native’s camp with a few stray natives about and their starving dogs …. The little white settlement [is] made up of seven houses including two private houses, two stores, a hotel, policeman’s houses, Chinese and Afghan’s houses; also two corrugated iron sheds for the half caste children.

Our buggy …. At last drew up to the house where I was to board for five months.

During these months I tried to understand the needs of the people, both black and white. I had seen a little of life in the country in Victoria but this is not Victorian bush, but an entirely new Australia – quite different from anything I had known. And although I had been on the fringe of it at Oodnadatta … I was yet to experience what it means to be utterly alone, without any means of escape from an isolated position – isolated in every sense.

Men went North and South with camels but it was eight months … before the next horses and buggy passed over that drought stricken country.

I had come here for a definite purpose – … to live here for one year … in order to discover the conditions and needs, from the point of a view of a nurse. And at the end of the year to report as to the usefulness of putting a nursing home here similar to the Hostel at Oodnadatta.

Something obviously was needed to make things more safe for these brave men and women who had settled in distant parts … but just how much could be done by a nurse unaided was the question: and could her own nerves stand the strain of the isolation and lack of proper food?

Extract from Finlayson, Jean  Life and Journeying in Central Australia – 1925 - Melbourne – Arbuckle Waddell printers ppp41-43

Two years and two months’ after a nurse’s salary was approved by his Board, Jean Finlayson, who was working for the A.I.M. in Oodnadatta, finally agreed to go north.

Travelling by horse and buggy in the winter of 1915, Jean arrived to an Alice locked down in drought.

Though an early letter published in The Inlander spoke of her delight in both the landscape and hospitality of the townsfolk, unpublished correspondence and Finlayson’s description of her experiences published 10 years later tell a different story.

‘Nurse Finlayson Tells of the Road to Alice Springs’

It was a delightful drive over 12 miles of flat country as we approached Alice Springs, and these hills are grand to look at. I am only anxious now to get on top of them.

Mr and Mrs Stott with whom I am now staying – along with Mrs Standley the teacher, who has been here over a year – are exceedingly kind, and we are most comfortable and happy.

Alice Springs is much in need of rain, everything being dry and dead for miles around. Still by industry and care Mr Stott has a good supply of vegetables, also milk and cream (goats).

Mrs Standley has done wonders with the school children, and the Bungalow for the half castes is a great institution. Mrs Stott has dusky assistants to help in the house.

These are early days to speak of our own work, but my hopes are high and everybody is most kind and friendly’.

The Inlander Volume 3 Third Quarter 1915 p123- 126
In my many lonely wonderings I visited the local burial place where I found evidence of the many who had passed by that way and fallen. … I waylaid native women and tried to know them better.

Sometimes they were sad, but more often they responded with a gay laugh. They are childlike and cheerful. They are lifted up or cast down according to the measure of their food supply …

My most frequent walk took me to the telegraph station to a class of white children on Sundays and to post letters and send wires on other days … this walk takes one along a track skirting the creek bed and passing over small stony rises all the way. At one part it passes through the midst of the natives’ camp …

To one not accustomed to the place and people it gave, at first, an eerie feeling to meet on some lonely sport, and hidden from view till one was close upon them, a company of natives, scantily clad and having their hands full of spears. But in time one grows accustomed to such sights and when passing give them a friendly nod …

Sitting on a boulder on the hillside one evening in the month of February, and watching daylight fade, I noticed that the natives already had their fires burning for although the days were hot, the evenings were sharp …

I see both camps quite clearly, the little humpies, the groups of frisking, laughing men, women and children and the dogs foraging around.

As dusk sets in I see from each home come those who have been employed during the day, bearing with them any scraps of food which would otherwise go into the waste bucket …

As they wend their way to the camp they call happily to each other and talk at a distance by signs. They are on familiar ground, and understand each other. They also have a subtle way of knowing all that is going on in the white people’s world, either for good or ill.

As I sat alone an old woman came out of her course to speak to me. On she came, carrying a jam tin of flour and the head of a goat. Leaping with bare feet from one rock to another, ignoring the pathway, at last she stood before me and said, “Good-day.” I replied: “good-day, Triff, you look happy sit down.” Down she curled on the stone beside me. She obviously had something on her mind and I kept silent. Presently she put her hand gently on my shoulder and said: “poor Nussa all alone: that no good.”

This simple old native touched on part of the problem of a nurse in the Centre – “one fella all alone, no good.”

Extract from Finlayson, Jean  Life and Journeying in Central Australia – 1925 - Melbourne – Arbuckle Waddell printers

Aboriginal Houses Alice Springs circa 1912 Flynn magic lantern transparency published in a 1913 edition of The Inlander devoted to the Aboriginal issue. Photo nla 24296063.
A shortage of accommodation which afflicted Alice Springs then, as it does now, forced Jean to spend her first five months living with Mr Stott, the ‘uncrowned King of Central Australia’. In addition to being the head policeman, Sergeant Stott was the mining warden, keeper of the gaol, head of the lands department, stock inspector, Protector of Aborigines, marriage registrar, clerk and bailiff of the local court, tax collector, electoral officer and etc. In an Alice Springs now administered by the Commonwealth of Australia, Stott was responsible for every aspect of government, except for the post and telegraph.

Mr Stott’s House, on the corner of Parsons and Hartley Street no longer exists. The Stuart Town Gaol can, however, still be found by those who look hard enough. Photograph circa 1917 by Otto Tschirn, courtesy of the Strehlow Research Centre, Larapinta Drive, Alice Springs.

This docket addressed to Nurse Finlayson shows her taking delivery of a box of books. Distributing books free of charge was one of the many services offered by the A.I.M. to the residents of Inland Australia. NLA_MS5574_Box 167_Folder 2_8
Excerpts from a letter from Jean Finlayson, to the Sec A.I.M. Committee - - Alice Springs 1916

… The post master and Policeman who have been in the bush for so many years and who are provided by the government with a large stack of drugs, lotions, dressings, books etc – and are in touch with the government doctor in Darwin, have been in the habit of acting as ‘doctor’ for so long that they cannot help interfering with the work of a nurse. And it would do a deal of good if there were a man here to look to them when they interfere.

(of course, working like this, a nurse is not employed in the ordinary way. If she were, I should have no difficulty in dealing with interference)…

The majority of bush people fancy that they know all that is to be known about nursing …

… Of course, we have only just commenced and people are a bit afraid and will take time to get out of their old ways. Post masters and Policemen do not live forever in one place and I have some idea that these will, before long be removed – so a nurse maybe encouraged to hold on.

I should like to see a married medical missionary here, but if not, then certainly a nurse.

(I suppose, when the N.T. has some sort of decent administration more people will settle here.)

However, whoever the A.I.M. sends to Alice Springs they must have a house to live in – this is indispensable.

What I should think an ideal place is just a few(5) rooms with wide passages and wide verandahs all around; wire doors and windows and the whole as dustproof as possible. …… I understand in this vast country it is the most difficult thing to obtain a few feet of ground to build a house upon ...

“When he got to the hill difficulty he found that the road went to the right and one to the left but the narrow way led right up the hill”

It is a hard climb alone but every obstruction cleared from the track helps to clear the way for those following after.
When news came that her mother was ill in Melbourne and there was enough rain to enable horses to travel between Alice and Oodnadatta, Jean left town.

It would be eleven years before Flynn was able to find another nurse willing to work in the Centre. By then he had decided to send his nurses Inland in twos.

JOTTINGS

Nurse Finlayson has left Alice Springs. She was to have stayed till the end of her year – a month later, but the method by which a woman arrives definitely at the date of her departure from Alice Springs district is a little bit complex:

1. She decides when she would like to leave.
2. She ascertains when some other woman wants to leave.
3. She and the other woman consult with their menfolk and work out a problem in which the factors are themselves, the “condition” of horses, the state of natural herbage along the track, and possibly one or two lesser considerations.

In Miss Finlayson’s case the solution was to leave about June 30th. She hoped, by ‘pressing on steadily” to reach Melbourne by July 20. We have not yet secured a successor.

Flynn, John The Inlander 1916

28/10/1918

Mr Alec Ross
Wauchope
Barrow Creek

Dear Mr Ross

……. We are glad to hear that the men are thinking favourably of our idea of a Nursing Home at Alice Springs. That is an old fad of mine, but since Miss Finlayson left we have not been able ever to find a nurse for one thing; and on the other hand we feel that a nurse will not have a chance to do the best work until there is a building of our own there. Further we are now persuaded that in all cases we must arrange for a mate to go with each nurse. …

……. We would be in a position to call for volunteers as soon as the war is over, when we hope to have a batch of nurses available who are now at the war

Yours faithfully, JF

NLA – AIM-Frontier Service Box 252 Folder 1
Flynn’s plans for a purpose-built hospital in Australia’s heart—an ‘architectural ‘tour de force’ … that would incorporate the lessons of the past and be a model for the future’ [McPheat, 1977, p 121] were also hampered by the lack of accommodation, shortage of local labour, absence of accessible building materials, expensive transport costs and lack of funds, which continue to characterise life in remote Australia.

The project was also opposed by a couple of local pastoralists, who believed that access to professional medical treatment would rob Inlanders of their natural resourcefulness by encouraging dependence on experts.

Camels carted building materials for Adelaide Hostel from the rail head at Oodnadatta. In the devastating drought of 1926 not even camels could get through forcing Flynn to pick up many of the building materials in his own car.

A BUILDING EXPERIMENT.

There has been an undertone of special enthusiasm among us over the building of a Nursing Home at Alice Springs. For one thing, that spot is what Dan Crawford would describe as “The Middle of the Middle of Australia”—surely the climax of “Inland”; then we have been talking of some action there since 1912: lastly, there is an experiment on.

What are the chief physical trials of women and invalids in the Inland? We would say that they are, according to season, heat, dust, flies, and light.

The last is not thought of as savagely as the other three; nevertheless of late some serious charges have been brought against it. It was in Queensland that we first heard a specially hard thing against the light: a brave little woman who had come from Scotland was describing her sensations after some years in that State, and this was the remark that set us thinking:—“When I wake in the morning and look out into the bright sunshine I feel terribly depressed.”

But why? Had we pressed her for an answer, no doubt we would have had to be satisfied with “Because.” The other day a native-born nurse, who has served six years in furthest-north Australia, remarked that in her opinion the glare did more harm to people than the heat. This just points to instinctive recognition of what has been seriously contended by scientists for some time, that in tropical areas the actinic rays of light—same ones that perform miracles on photographic plates in exposures of one-thousandth of a second—are so very powerful that they penetrate the white woman’s delicate skin, and cause her nerves to deteriorate. Her dusky sister is protected by a skin that is really an effective “colour-screen.” Men suffer in the same way until they can develop a healthy tan, but as they normally enjoy a plentiful reserve of nerve there is little need to worry about them.

Our conviction is that there is much in the theory, so we have bracketed light with the usual three wicked enemies of the woman on our frontiers. Not that she worries necessarily, for mostly she laughs them aside as part of the game of life; but some enemies are active even while they cause us no worry whatever.

Flynn, John. The Inlander Vol 6 No 1, 1920 p48
12th June 1924

Dear Mr Adamson

Many thanks for your letter …… We really expected that something would be done long ere this in the way of a definite start on the completion of the building. So many things have intervened of an early start being made. …… Mr Flynn has been engaged for the last few months on the new issue of “The Inlander” and has practically let everything else rip for the time being …. 

The Alice hostel was named Adelaide House in recognition of the huge contribution funds raised in Adelaide made towards the hostel’s building costs. NLA_MS5574 Box 147 Folder

It took seven years for the A.I.M. to acquire the land and funds necessary to commence work on Flynn’s dream hospital.

The builder was ‘old Jack Williams’, a 70 year old stone mason who had begun his working career as a smuggler on the Isle of Wight. Jack had built Alice’s only other large stone building - the Stuart Town Gaol. The thick stone walls of both buildings – made to last for centuries - were hand hewn from local stone, with ‘old Jack’ doing most of the work on Flynn’s hostel himself.

When funds - raised from local donations and an Adelaide fete - ran out in 1923, work stopped once more.

The building stood unfinished for so long locals started calling it ‘Flynn’s Folly’.

Adelaide House circa 1923 - View of Alice Springs home as it stood for over two years through unavoidable delays. Flynn photo.
Plans to finish the hospital were put on hold as Flynn attended to the other demands of his A.I.M. superintendency.

*The Inlander*, which Flynn intended to publish every three months, had appeared with less and less frequency over the years. This was partly because Flynn spent so much time ‘living on the wallaby’ – visiting every part of his huge parish – that he had no time to prepare it for print and partly because his passion for mapping his dreams and putting his ideas into visual form was time-consuming work.

Flynn’s map showing inland hospitals and plans for an aerial medical service, was created was published in *The Inlander* in 1924 several years before the enabling technology had been invented. The map was also sold as coloured poster to raise funds for the technical experiments needed to make Flynn’s dream work. Collection Adelaide House.
The front pages of successive Inlanders – which begin with definite publication dates and end with the statement that the Inlander ‘like other Bush Travellers appears as best it can’ - attest to the difficulties Flynn faced in meeting his own publication deadlines. Editions of The Inlander, when they did appear, were often sold out. Collection Adelaide House and the Old Timers Traeger Museum.
Then there was the mountain of correspondence resulting from Flynn’s pioneering radio work – letters to government departments in several Australian states seeking legal permission to conduct his wireless experiments; letters to wireless enthusiasts exchanging problems and seeking solutions; letters to individuals and organisations seeking funds; letters to interested parishioners; reports to his Board, etc. The task was so huge Flynn himself ‘wondered how I could write another line for ‘The Inlander’ and ‘every mail was a dread’. [Flynn, Superintendent’s Report 1/2/26]

Flynn was also facing mounting pressure from some of the A.I.M.’s city-based Board members.

Concerned about the spiralling costs of Flynn’s wireless and building experiments, some of the board thought he should abandon the flying doctor dream and return to the traditional duties of Christian ministry.

In October 1925, Flynn escaped to Alice.

An order form showing the cost and number of items needed for Flynn’s radio experiments at a time when they were failing miserably and many wireless enthusiasts were of the opinion that what Flynn wanted to achieve i.e. small cost effective wireless communications was impossible! NLA MS3288_Box 4

Flynn’s own optimism about the eventual success of his radio work shines through in this letter to his father written in 1926 from Alice Springs. The home referred to is Adelaide House. Alice Springs radio stations still have call signs beginning with the letter 8. NLA MS3288 Box 2
Though the town had grown little since Flynn’s first visit twelve years earlier Flynn’s way of getting there had undergone revolutionary change.

In 1925 Flynn travelled by car – a Dodge utility specially fitted with extra springs to enable it to survive the dirt tracks, which constituted the Inland’s ‘roads’.

In country entirely lacking in petrol stations, let alone car mechanics, Flynn taught himself ‘basic’ car maintenance by taking the Dodge apart and then re-building it, bolt by bolt, before leaving Adelaide.

George Towns, a wireless expert from WW1, with aerials and other items loaded on Flynn’s car, ca. 1925

Skipper Partridge’s tool box, Old Timer’s Traeger Museum - which also contains a replica of Flynn’s famous car.

As this list of petrol and car parts shows, early motor transport in the centre of Australia required a degree of self sufficiency and mechanical knowledge city motorists have never been required to have. Original document in NLA MS5574_Box167_Folder1_7
Three and a half hours after arriving in Alice with a truck load of experimental wireless gear, Flynn drove back to Oodnadatta to pick up the Adelaide builders who would finish his dream hospital.

It was a trip he was to make frequently, as he transported workers, building supplies and even patients between Oodnadatta railway station and Alice Springs.

With each adventurous journey, Flynn became more skilled at navigating the sand dunes, invisible holes, occasional bogs and gibber strewn vehicle traps of the track.

Flynn’s 12-month Alice sojourn, even with all this travel, was one of the longest periods of ‘settled’ living he was to experience during his extensive working life.
As it had been in 1915, the Alice Flynn lived in was gripped by drought. Unlike Nurse Finlayson, however, Flynn relished the isolation drought brought. It was a welcome respite from the ‘strain of recent years’ and gave him the opportunity to experience first-hand the challenges of outback living.

Reporting to the Board on yet more building delays and costly half-successful radio experiments, Flynn wrote:

“I am feeling more and more that the time has come when as many of the ‘Board as possible should see the Inland for themselves. To face strange conditions and difficulties into which I will not enter here, and personal touch is desirable. Can all dream of at least one trip Inland? My car is big and there are others.’

[Superintendent’s Report 1/2/26]
Flynn spent his time in Alice writing letters, holding less-than-well attended Church services, trying to listen to the radio and assisting the builders finish the hospital. Though the builders worked overtime through a long hot summer and mild winter, the size of the building and the intricacies of Flynn's innovative cooling system created more delays and expenses.

Handwritten invoice for labourer working on the Alice Hostel, now known as Adelaide House. MS5574 Box 252 Folder 5
Finally, on June 24th 1926, Adelaide House was opened with formal flag-flying ceremony even though it still wasn’t finished.

Twenty seven church dignitaries and A.I.M. supporters drove to Alice, almost doubling the town’s European population and straining its capacity to feed them.

Ironically, the hospital’s first patient was Flynn himself, who was treated for a hand injury acquired digging his way out of a bog.

While the much-wanted rain created havoc for the centre’s motorists it failed to break the drought.

Unfortunately, falls of rain are erratic as to season, and sudden flooding storms in wrong months sometimes leave the country worse off than rain-gauge records would indicate.

Flynn, The Inlander, 1927

So at last in 1926, “The Adelaide House” – hoped and worked for since 1913 – became a reality, all gauzed in and furnished, which is quietly being enriched by Sisters Small and Pope. Messrs Wilkinson and Adamson serve as Secretary and Treasurer, and residents are taking keen interest in developing a real haven for those who come in weak from illness and that subtle depression sometimes joined thereto – which we may call ‘bush shock’. Our idea was a spot, in the very heart of the bush, where all might come at times to forget that they are in the bush. Our very love for the bush demands more retreats of this kind, which silently breathe their benediction.

Flynn, The Inlander: A Voice from the Uttermost Frontier of Settlement in Australia; published by the A.I.M. Board to Stimulate THE BATTLE FOR A BRIGHTER BUSH

Number 19 October 1927 p41
With the hospital still not finished, Flynn confessed to being exhausted by the ‘long drawn out agony of the job’. Reluctantly he concluded that purpose built architecture was inappropriate to Inland conditions. Though ‘tradesmen seem to have a horror of ‘ready out boxes’ he wrote, pre-fabricated building probably was the best solution to the Inland’s infrastructure problems.

The opening of Adelaide House did, however, bring with it a change in Flynn’s Inland fortunes. The car convoy attending the opening carried the news that Flynn’s childhood friend, the wealthy Victorian industrialist H.V. McKay had died bequeathing Flynn sufficient funds to continue his wireless experiments.

Flynn made a ‘quick dash’ to Melbourne to convince his Board that he should be allowed to continue his practical Inland work.

Barber arrived on the last car, and told me that the most understanding friend of my dearest dreams was dead. My heart stood still; but, almost in the same breath, he spoke of your father’s beneficence and of his verbal instructions to the Trustees, who were awaiting my return. Within a day or two of my arrival in Melbourne £2,000 had been offered toward an Aerial Medical service experiment and everyone was too busy looking forward to ever look back!

You will understand how my heart stood still, for ‘you know something of the years throughout which you father, with me, studied obstacles in our path, and waited impatiently for the day when the battle might wisely be joined.”

Flynn letter cited in McPheat p124
 Flynn returned to Alice with Alf Traeger, the young south Australian radio enthusiast of German-Lutheran descent who invented the radio transceiver which revolutionised outback communications in the 1930s.

The ‘Silence of the ‘Dumb Inland’ was in Flynn’s words, finally broken in November 1926 making possible ‘the swift succour to the sick, the breaking of monotony, the stimulus to [Inland] commerce’ that Flynn had long dreamt of. [Pastor Albrecht from Hermannsburg Mission, paraphrasing Flynn, cited in McPheat p127].

Wireless enthusiasts across the country helped Flynn and Treager with their radio experiments. MS3288 Box 4_Folder9
A work weary Flynn was sent on the first holiday he had taken since visiting Darwin in 1912. He went to the Holy Lands.

With work always at the forefront of his mind, he also attended the world’s first aerial ambulance conference in Paris.

The screwdriver Flynn used to repair broken sewing machines on station visits. In the city Flynn oiled the squeaky prams he passed in the street. Collection Adelaide House

The importance of the pedal radio in breaking the isolation of outback residents is clearly evident in this letter from the Hermannsburg Aboriginal mission. The letter also reveals the affection local Lutherans working for Aboriginal centralians held for Flynn whose parishioners were European station owners. NLA MS3288

With passenger planes yet to be invented, Flynn travelled to Jerusalem by ship. Characteristically he continued working until the very last moment nearly missing his passage and nearly taking the keys to his office with him. They were thrown from aboard the moving ship just after she left the shore! The streamers in the background of this pre-departure photo show how close the ship was to leaving before Flynn went aboard.
In Alice Springs, Flynn’s hospital, with its two unmarried nurses, became the centre of the town’s social life, apparent proof of Flynn’s belief that more women in the outback would sweeten the whole of outback life.

In Alice Springs, Sunday 3/7/27

… Alice Springs is situated in mountains … very different from the flat interior one always pictures Australia to have … a very beautiful spot.

The hostel is the main building, and is really most imposing. Some locals suggest the building is much too good; but Alice Springs must have a future as capital of Central Australia. Already Government residences are being built on plans similar to the hostel’ so soon the local inhabitants will be quite ashamed of their own shanties, and a general rebuilding may result …

The soil all round is very fertile, and given a rainfall the country would be most prosperous … Alice Springs oranges are the finest I have tasted.

When the railway comes through everyone predicts a future for Alice Springs as a wool-producing country …

The hostel is the centre of the town and the general meeting-place for all… Funnily enough … the two men in the district who were most opposed to the hostel … were the first patients, and now are most loyal and enthusiastic supporters …

Alice Springs Hostel is a model of what the A.I.M. can do. Two fine wards, electric light, sewerage … As I sit on the open verandah, looking towards the Gap, I feel I am almost in a different world to yours. A tame emu is walking about outside. Blacks are playing in their camp and a string of camels is coming along the road with goods from Oodnadatta.

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The hostel is the main building, and is really most imposing. Some locals suggest the building is much too good; but Alice Springs must have a future as capital of Central Australia. Already Government residences are being built on plans similar to the hostel’ so soon the local inhabitants will be quite ashamed of their own shanties, and a general rebuilding may result …

The soil all round is very fertile, and given a rainfall the country would be most prosperous … Alice Springs oranges are the finest I have tasted.

When the railway comes through everyone predicts a future for Alice Springs as a wool-producing country …

The hostel is the centre of the town and the general meeting-place for all… Funnily enough … the two men in the district who were most opposed to the hostel … were the first patients, and now are most loyal and enthusiastic supporters …

Alice Springs Hostel is a model of what the A.I.M. can do. Two fine wards, electric light, sewerage … As I sit on the open verandah, looking towards the Gap, I feel I am almost in a different world to yours. A tame emu is walking about outside. Blacks are playing in their camp and a string of camels is coming along the road with goods from Oodnadatta.

Extract from Diary Letters of George Simpson: Australian Inland Mission Patrol June, July August 1927 (Ford + Sons, Carlton) p20-21

Flynn’s miniature tool kit always travelled with him. Flynn had a passion for fixing small things. Collection Adelaide House.

Nell Small and Ina Pope – Alice Springs first hospital nurses on Alice Hostel opening day June 1926. After a dramatic journey to central Australia both women married local men spending decades of their lives living in the Territory. For more information view ‘A Souvenir of my Trip Inland’ a multi media installation based on the diary and photograph album of Nell Small on display at Adelaide House. Photo and caption from Nell Small’s photo album.
The Alice hostel's dominance of the town's landscape didn't last long.

In 1928 Alice Springs was declared the capital of a new Australian territory descriptively named Central Australia. The move sparked a miniature building boom in government accommodation at a time when the settlement had a European population of just 40.

Eighteen months later, after decades of talk, the much anticipated railway finally came to town.

Central Australia

This year after long use merely as a popular term “Central Australia” has been elevated to official recognition; it now denotes a section of what was formerly the ‘Northern Territory,’ comprising all of the old territory lying south of the 20th parallel. That portion left to north is now officially known as ‘North Australia’…

The change is welcome and useful. But one cannot help regretting our national timidity on the sea of terms, “Australia,” “Northern Australia,” “Central Australia,” “South Australia,” “Western Australia,” all now on the map; why not be consistent and substitute for Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania the respective titles of “North-East Australia,” Eastern Australia,” “South-East Australia” and “Little Australia”!!!

… It is fitting that, at the very moment of Central Australia’s birth as a separate entity, attention of the public generally throughout the Commonwealth should be turning thereto in quite a new way. During the last two years the number of visitors has run into hundreds. With the railway, a regular tourist traffic will develop.

Flynn, *The Inlander: A Voice from the Uttermost Frontier of Settlement in Australia*; Published by the A.I.M. Board to Stimulate THE BATTLE FOR A BRIGHTER BUSH Number 19 October 1927

Government letterhead and a few buildings in Parsons Street are all that remain of the short lived Territory of Central Australian. In 1931 a cash strapped Canberra re-united central Australia with the tropical north and Alice lost its status as one of the nation’s capitals. Court letterhead from Northern Territory Archives Service Police Station Alice Springs F84
The railway created boom times for local pastoralists who could transport cattle to southern markets in less time and in better condition than had been previously possible.

The railway also made possible the depression gold rush which created the town of Tennant Creek in the 1930s, adding further fuel to Alice’s economic growth.

And finally, the railway provided the bones of a new, if still barely profitable industry, tourism.

By the end of the decade Alice’s population had increased twenty two fold.

At the end of this decade of extraordinary growth Alice Springs finally got its own Flying Doctor base when Flynn persuaded Adelaide Miethke, that funds raised for a remote South Australian base would be better spent in Alice Springs. The service was run by Eddie Connellan who also established the centre’s first airline. For more information visit the Aviation Museum at the Araluen Cultural Precinct on Larapinta Drive.

An early commonwealth rail poster selling central Australia as a tourist destination. Most of the first tourists were anthropologists and scientists eager to study the centre’s Aboriginal population. Amongst these was the ‘infamous’ Olive Pink who came to town on a free rail employee’s ticket in 1930. For more information visit the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens.

Kevan Weaber, son of Tennant’s richest blind miner, holds some of the booty which lead an Australian prime minister to call Tennant Creek the greatest goldfield in the Commonwealth. Photo from ‘Freedom, Fortitude and Flies’ a social history exhibition at the Battery Hill Mining Centre Tennant Creek.
Alice Springs
Oct 18th 1928

Dear Mr Flynn,

Just a line to let you know that I am still alive, yes, not knocked out by the … drought yet… I heard you had been ill and was very sorry, but the whole things amounts to this Mr Flynn, too much work … you would not know the place now, with all the Government buildings going up … but I won’t consider they are in the same class as the hospital … they are regular hot houses. They were built without any foundations and are only abut four inches off the ground. If it were to rain here, they will have all their floors under water. Can’t understand the Government building places like those … things at Hostel are OK, only one patient, young Price with a broken leg. Yours truly, Bill.

Bill was Bill Littlejohn, the local policeman, who married Nell Small, one of Adelaide house’s first nurses. For more information on the government buildings referred to in this letter visit The Residency, Parsons Street, Alice Springs or go to www.nt.gov.au/meta/heritage/visit/residency/history.html NLA MS3288 Box 1 Folder 2

The prohibition laws were temporarily passed to prevent relationships between Aboriginal women and the 600 or so single men who built the railway line across the desert. Document extract from National Archives of Australia A1, 1930/232

The prohibition laws were continued after railway construction was completed to prevent local nomads from using the town centre as a ‘closet’. National Archives of Australia, A1, 1930, 232. The register of the town’s gaol shows that prohibited area laws were enforced with increasing severity as the decade progressed. Northern Territory Archives Service F110
Alice’s prosperity ended with the bombing of Darwin in 1942 and the evacuation of the town’s civilian population who were replaced by thousands of southern soldiers on their way to war in the Pacific. The soldiers were, however, a boon to the local pastoralists who supplied the army with meat.

When the war was over, many of those whose eyes had been opened to Centralia’s beauty by their war forced Inland travels, returned to make Alice their home. Alice experienced boom years once more.

Dear Olive,

As you will see by the above address, I am at Ray’s place. Gold mining was stopped at Tennant Creek, although I believe one mine, a large company with its own crushing plant was still going strong …

We went to Alice Springs. Jim was thinking about prospecting for Wolfram but the conditions offering were not tempting enough and we had decided to return to Victoria when an order was posted up ordering all civilians not doing essential war work to be ready for evacuation. We were doing nothing so got away in the first batch …

With greetings from all here,

Yours the ant,
Francie

from ‘Freedom, Fortitude and Flies: Daily Life on Tennant’s Goldfields’ a social history exhibition at The Battery Hill Mining Centre, Tennant Creek. The Havard Collection.

About 40 mixed descent children, who lived at ‘The Bungalow’ were also evacuated to Adelaide after Darwin was bombed. Their house mother was Mrs McCoy nee Ina Pope, one of the first nurses at Adelaide house. This photo was taken sometime in 1942 during their evacuation by train to Adelaide. NTAS Conservation Commission Collection.
Flynn spent the 1930s ‘on the wallaby’ establishing A.I.M. hospitals and flying doctor bases in as many remote Australian towns as funds would allow.

When war came Flynn exchanged his three piece suit for army khaki and sent his patrol padres to minister to soldiers serving overseas. His own inland travels didn’t stop.

In Alice Springs Adelaide House was turned into accommodation for army nurses while in the bush, Flynn’s pedal radios became the eyes and ears of allied defence as station owners watched the skies for enemy planes and conscientiously censored their personal conversations to ensure no mention of allied troop movements were ever made.

Flynn's attitude to WW11 appears to be a marked change from his attitude to WW1 when he mourned every padre and nurse who left for the European front. Friends and acquaintances of Flynn marvelled at his habit of wearing a three piece suit no matter where he found himself.

Civilians like Flynn could not enter the Northern Territory from 1942 until the end of the war without first obtaining a military permit, like the one above. Soldiers were posted at Heavitree Gap in Alice to monitor all civilian movements. No permit meant no entry to the town. NLA MS3288 Box12
When peace arrived, 64 year old Flynn returned to working on those of his 1912 inland dreams still not completed. Foremost amongst these were an aged care facility for old bushies and support for home education.

Flynn was alive to see the first Old Timers cottage built in an appropriately beautiful bush setting on the outskirts of Alice Springs.

Unfortunately he died before the ‘School of the Air’ opened its now world famous doors.
Miniature wood plane, one of Flynn’s tools – Collection Adelaide House.

Rev John Flynn was succeeded by the Rev Fred McKay as head of the Australian Inland Mission. For more information about how John Flynn persuaded Fred McKay that the sands of Birdsville were as beautiful as the sand of Queensland beaches visit the Fred McKay Education Centre, St Philips College, Alice Springs.

Further Reading:
Hudson, Harry *Flynn’s Flying Doctors* 1956
Griffiths, Max *The Silent Heart* Flynn of the Inland* Kangaroo Press* 1993
Linn, Robert *Shifting Sands to Solid Rock: Ninety Years of Frontier Services* Frontier Services 2002
McAndrew, Harry *The Inland Saga: a Sketch of the Australian Inland Mission through 60 years* 1993
McKenzie, Maisie *Outback Achiever Fred McKay Successor to Flynn of the Inland* Boolarong Press 1990

This .pdf is the second of three booklets created by Megg Kelham for the Collaborative Museums Education Project funded by the Regional Museums Grants Support Programme, Museum and Art Gallery NT.

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It is our sincere hope that this booklet will encourage you to visit the attractions on The Flynn Trail. These attractions are:
The Old Timers Traeger Museum
Adelaide House
The John Flynn Memorial Church
Flynn’s Grave
The Fred McKay Museum, St Philips College
The Royal Flying Doctor Service
The School of the Air.
Following in Flynn’s Footsteps

Part 3: For Christ & Continent - Controversy & Contradiction

by Megg Kelham

Plaque honouring Flynn’s Inland achievements, John Flynn Memorial Church, Todd Mall, Alice Springs.
Flynn’s tireless dedication to Inland Australia was motivated, as the by-line to every edition of The Inlander proudly declared, by his love ‘for Christ and the continent’.

Like many of his contemporaries Flynn believed that ‘effective British occupation’ of the Australian continent could only be said to have taken place when ‘adequate numbers’ of European citizens actually lived in the land they claimed to own.

Flynn’s passion for visually representing his ideas is no where better illustrated than in this graphic depiction of Australian history since the arrival of Europeans which was published in the North Australia Centenary Edition of The Inlander, September 1924.
In this 1920’s A.I.M promotional leaflet, Flynn urged his European readers to accept the doctrine that *We must occupy or we must lose!* National library of Australia, MS3288 Box 2

Although Flynn did not create the above diagram, he did choose to publish it in the “Northern Australia Centenary” edition of The Inlander in 1924. Collection Adelaide House.
And though Flynn understood that European settlement was having a negative impact on the lives of Australia’s first inhabitants, it did not deter him from determined pursuit of his nation building dreams.

Tuesday July 22nd 1919

Police Horses at Alice Springs

Police Horse Tully + Little left for Arltunga.

Sent collect wire Police Darwin “Four adult Europeans two my children number aboriginals sick symptoms influenza temperature average hundred three and four desire Doctor prescribe no death stop twenty one aboriginals died Oodnadatta influenza stop …”

Alice Springs, Police Journal NTAS F255

ABOUT OUR ABORIGINES

Both Church and State have done much at times to help aborigines, but it must be admitted that, viewed as a whole, our efforts have been terribly amateurish. Our benediction on the blacks has been like the curate’s egg – good in parts.

Our efforts need to be increased, improved, systematised.

We do not presume to lay down methods of work but we do know and assert that more compassion is needed in regard to the aged, more commonsense in regard to the young.

Flynn, The Inlander 1915

What of our Aborigines? Their part in the future Australian Picture seems likely to be small indeed, as may be inferred from the tabulated figures. What their original numbers were can never be known. Although, in the main, they were treated with kindness by pioneers, their simple ways left them peculiarly susceptible to minor diseases contracted from our own race, while influenza, consumption, and social diseases have taken a terrible toll; but the ways of the Aborigine are inscrutable – some say the root evil is loss of will-to-live in the midst of invaders. These people suggest many interesting ethical problems, to be thought out by moralists who have taken over their land in the name of higher culture, and all-round efficiency!

Flynn, The Inlander John Flynn 1924 p21-22
Flynn’s practical nation focussed approach to his work as a Christian minister was criticised by those of his church colleagues who thought he should be building churches and delivering sermons to his congregation rather than providing medical services to the community at large.

On every side we see, amongst politicians and public alike, a new born interest in the problem of effectively occupying Australia. This growing interest comes none too soon.

“The Inlander” and the A.I.M. for which we speak are engaged in a service which is two-fold: we strive to assist in developing certain material activities, while earnestly engaged in considering spiritual matters.

Many criticise us, some severely. They say we are neglecting the spiritual by wasting our energies on material things.

We lack time and space to discuss this wide question, so can only assert that we are intensely concerned about realities beyond the shadows.

Nevertheless we, as ideal-mongers, have been compelled to dabble in material things such as papers and inks, cameras and developers, tracing linens and mathematical instruments, maps and endless other time-absorbers.

So likewise we, as evangelists, interest ourselves in fishing and grazing, mining and farming, building and helping and various other matters which concern ‘soul-cases’.

Flynn, John in *The Inlander No June 1922* p3-4 in an article Flynn called “The New Game for Young and Old: Painting Australia Red"
Flynn’s unapologetic dedication to working for the white population of the Australian Inland was also criticised by many of those who had dedicated their lives to working for Aboriginal Australians.

In the early 1930s concern centred on Aboriginal access, or its lack, to Alice Springs’ only hospital, the A.I.M. run Adelaide House.

‘It will be hardly necessary to point out that the A.I.M. serves white people, primarily. Many aborigines are nursed by our Sisters; but owing to differences in language and customs, religious endeavor on their behalf is directed by “Foreign” Mission Committees.”

Flynn, John The Inlander
No 19 October 1927
Toby, the Alice Springs police tracker was the second aboriginal in-patient [of Adelaide Hostel]. He went to sleep while in charge of three aboriginal prisoners. A Dr Walker who was passing through from Darwin recorded the details. “The Prisoners chopped his skull open, partly gouged his right eye out and made a large gash on his neck … He regained consciousness to find his forehead hanging over his cheek. He tucked it under his hat and walked the 2 miles to the Hospital. Here I spent 2 hours picking out splinters of bone … pieces of dirt and cleaned it up with iodine and Carbolic – put in 16 stitches without anaesthetic. He did not flinch … However to my surprise and everyone else’s, he recovered. …”

Bucknall – Flynn’s Mantle of Safety: The Story of Adelaide House p 11

Early hospital records, like this photograph of an Aboriginal man who walked from Utopia to Alice to have his cyst removed in the hospital’s first operation, show that Aboriginal patients were amongst the hospital’s first inmates.

When the Commonwealth government prohibited Aboriginal people from entering the town’s business district in 1928 however, they also effectively excluded Aborigines from access to the hospital which was located within the town boundaries. At least one of the local citizens appointed to the community advisory board which recommended the creation of the town’s first prohibition laws was also a long term supporter of the A.I.M. and member of the board of Adelaide House.

Photo: NTAS McCoy Collection ASTS 761
Flynn’s attitudes to Aboriginal Australia caused heated debate in Presbyterian church circles in 1936 when Dr Charles Duguid, founder of the Ernabella Aboriginal mission, blamed the disparate living conditions of black and white centralians on the blatant racism of Flynn and his parishioners.

In July 1934, I started on my first trip to the north. …my stay in the Alice Springs area, which was to last for three and a half weeks, was a valuable experience. It confirmed many things that I had been told about the situation of the Australian Aborigines in those days and opened my eyes to the way in which they were treated… I was introduced to the Padre of the Australian Inland Mission. Almost his first words were, ‘I believe you are interested in the niggers?’

To hear this from the local leader of the mission maintained by my own church was staggering, but I asked only, ‘Do you mean the Aborigines?’

‘You can call them what you like. They’ve never been any good and never will be. The best they’ve any right to expect is a decent funeral.

I was to discover that his attitude was not uncommon. Very few of the white residents of Alice Springs spared the Aborigines as much as a thought …

The comments made by the Padre of the Australian Inland Mission had been a shock, especially since I had thought that the A.I.M. was caring for Aborigines as well as whites. Instead it was accentuating the divisions, and when I returned to Adelaide I called the Director of the A.I.M. to discuss it with him. He was utterly frank, the A.I.M. is only for white people”, he told me. “You are only wasting your time among so many damned dirty niggers.”

It is fair to say however that the A.I.M. did a splendid job for the white community, especially for the white women who lived such hard and isolated lives in the outback. Its hostels always staffed by two fully trained nursing sisters, have given invaluable medical service where no other existed.

The original A.I.M. was the Aborigines Inland Mission, founded by Mrs Retta Long. She told me that she called on John Flynn and asked him not to cause confusion by using the same initials when the Australian Inland Mission began work, but he refused to change them. This was unfortunate, because the two organisations operated in very different fields and with completely different methods.

As a doctor I was appalled by the physical condition of the Aborigines… soon afterwards in Adelaide I made an urgent appeal for a Public Hospital to be built in Alice Springs, to treat all cases of need regardless of colour or race. At that time, the only place where the sick could be nursed was the A.I.M. Hostel, but the sisters were not allowed to admit patients with Aboriginal blood.

The Alice Springs hospital was opened in 1939, but it was not until 1958 that the Executive of the A.I.M. allowed its staff to treat Aborigines.

Dr Duguid was very authoritative in his views and his large bushy eyebrows and broad facial features emphasised the strength behind his words. I was aware of the running feud between Dr Duguid and the Rev John Flynn. It was simply a clash of two strong personalities.

When Dr Duguid published his memoirs in 1972, just as Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was revolutionising European Aboriginal relations by creating national anti-discrimination and land rights legislation, the controversy about Flynn’s racism erupted into the public sphere.

Flynn was a man of his generation and lived at a time when social philosophies relating to Aboriginal self-determination were not developed. He was sure of the specific task allotted to him and that work among the very deserving Aboriginal people was part of the defined charter of a well-equipped sister department of the Church. Furthermore, the logbooks of the Flying Doctor Service from the earliest days reveal overwhelming evidence of Flynn’s practical policy of giving medical care to all people irrespective of colour and creed.” P106

McKay, Fred. Flynn, John NTDB – Vol 1 pp 103 -107

My family grew up loving John Flynn, the flying doctor man, because he helped my grandmother walk. In the days when Arrernte people camped at the Telegraph station, my grandmother had a sore leg. Flynn made her some wooden crutches so she could get around. My grandmother grew us up to respect him as a ngankere which in our language means healer.


On the basis of Duguid's statement, Sir Marcus Oliphant, then Governor of South Australia, delivered a speech in August 1972 in which he claimed that Flynn had 'refused absolutely to have anything whatever to do with the black people'. This, together with Oliphant's further assertion that Flynn had said 'the black people should be allowed to die out as rapidly as possible', brought shocked denials from Flynn's former colleagues in the Presbyterian Church. Oliphant's statements were a '[perversion] of factual history', the Reverend Fred McKay, Moderator General of the Presbyterian Church, tersely responded: 'People who knew Flynn would never say that he had contempt for Aborigines'. Yet Oliphant's strongest defenders were themselves former acquaintances and colleagues of the legendary 'Flynn of the Inland'. Congratulating Oliphant for 'telling the truth about John Flynn', Justice Howard Zelling wrote: 'I knew Dr Flynn .. Whatever Flynn might have said on public platforms, he left no one in doubt in private conversation that his view were: (a) that the Aborigines were dying out (b) that they were lazy, shiftless good for nothings.'

Dear Mr Partridge

You know me, I suppose, as a wild barbarian with no God and no religion, but that does not prevent me having now, and having always had a great admiration for the Rev John Flynn, who I hear has passed away … He was one of the fortunate men who realised a need, stepped into the breach and lived to see his dream come true. He showed the politicians and so-called statesmen whose job it was to do what he did. But it never entered their heads to do it, because they suffered humanity’s eternal sin of blindness and hardness of heart.

If I believed in a God of Justice, I would have also to believe that such a God would be compelled to wipe the evil city of humanity off the face of the earth; but such men as Flynn in the city might cause him to stay his hand.

I have read a report that a monument is to be erected to Flynn; if so, I am more than willing to make a donation to it. Not that generally I approve of monuments, for I realise that the more a man has one, the less he deserves one. But in Flynn’s case I have a yen to be illogical for once. Flynn is one of the few who need no monument, but even so the idea might be worth commending, so that ages hence, the passer-by might stop and say in his heart: “The truest vision ever had of Christ came here.”

And if for a moment I assume that the general opinion of humanity may be right, and that beyond death there is another life, a life where the great and good receive their reward – then in that life, if it be counted for honour to fight and win the battle on behalf of the maimed, the sick, the dying, helpless in the grim and lonely wilderness; in that life among the highest and most honoured will be found the soul of John Flynn of the Inland’.

Alex Kerr,
Delney Station, via Arltunga, Central Australia

as cited in Ford, Margaret Beyond the Furthest Fences Rigby 1966
Contradictions

The man who worked so hard to make the Inland safe for women and children married late in life and had no children of his own.

The man who nurtured green lawns and hopes his nurses would marry in the outback and stay to build homes of their own, was himself homeless.

The man who spent his life making it easier for remote Australians to access medical help was reluctant to seek medical help himself.

Flynn, the map maker, failed geography at school.

The man who argued that the isolation of the outback was the birth place of the unique ‘Aussie spirit’ devoted his life to ending that same isolation.

The man who battled Australia’s involvement in Europe’s war at the expense of Inland Australians, got all the technological breakthroughs which enabled the Royal Flying Doctor Service to be established from that same war.
This .pdf is the third of three booklets created by Megg Kelham for the Collaborative Museums Education Project, funded by the Regional Museums Grant Support Programme, Museum and Art Gallery NT.

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- Adelaide House
- The John Flynn Memorial Church
- Flynn's Grave
- The Fred McKay Museum, St Philips College
- The Royal Flying Doctor Service

Further Reading:

- Central Land’s Council Flynn’s Grave – The return to Karlu Karlu
  http://www.clc.org.au/People_Culture/sacred_sites/karlu_karu_return.html

- Griffiths, Max The Silent Heart Flynn of the Inland Kangaroo Press 1993

- Haines, Bridgit, ‘INLAND FLYNN Pioneer? Racist? Or product of his time?’ in Eureka Street

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  Biography Vol One: to 1945 NTU Press 1990

