C Y O’Connor

Charles Yelverton O’Connor was born on 11 January 1843 at ‘Gravelmount’, Castletown, County Meath, Ireland.

At seventeen he began his training in civil engineering and left Ireland for New Zealand in 1864 to begin a career in civil engineering and surveying.

In March 1874 O’Connor married Susan Letitia Ness and their eight children, four girls and four boys, were all born in New Zealand.

The family left New Zealand in 1891 for the colony of Western Australia, O’Connor having been recruited as Engineer-in-Chief by the Premier, John Forrest.

The first project on Forrest’s program of public works was the development of a harbour at Fremantle which progressed through O’Connor’s ten years of service in WA. The harbour was officially opened in 1897 but construction and expansion continued through the early part of the twentieth century. O’Connor also undertook port works at major points all along Western Australia’s 5,500 km coastline from Eucla to Wyndham.

Railway expansion came under the broad ranging responsibilities of O’Connor who also held the position of General Manager of Railways. Forrest wanted progress with a minimum of expense and O’Connor’s advice took time to be acknowledged. Most stubbornly resisted were his attempts to have funds allocated to the establishment of workshops to maintain the rolling stock.

The gold discoveries of the 1890s and the resulting increase in population created an urgent problem of providing an assured fresh water supply to the Eastern Goldfields. The expanding Railway system took supplies as far as Southern Cross but the problem in Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie grew more acute.

In the mid 1890s, O’Connor, with the support from Forrest, completed details of his plan to pump water along a pipeline from Mundaring to Coolgardie. He faced a long struggle with lack of funds and lack of co-operation in assembling all the necessary data about projected usage and costs. There was violent opposition in Parliament as to the practicability of the scheme but permission to go ahead was finally given in 1898. The delays and continual criticism culminated in O’Connor taking his own life on 10 March 1902.

Work on the pipeline was completed in January 1903 and Lady Forrest ‘started’ the pumping machine at an official ceremony on the 22 January at Mundaring.
O'Connor found his recreation in horse riding, was reputedly a delightful host and was patron of several sports clubs in Fremantle. He was known as a compassionate man with an innate sense of justice. Pride in his work and devotion to his family characterised the man who achieved brilliant civil engineering feats in the last century and was, according to his private secretary, a man of ‘extra-ordinary foresight’.

In 2001 a biography by A G Evans, C Y O'Connor: His Life and Legacy, was published by the University of Western Australia. On 22 and 24 January 2003 celebrations were held at Mundaring and Kalgoorlie to celebrate the centenary of the pipeline, and in 2004 the National Trust of Australia (WA) re-opened Number 1 Pump Station at Mundaring to celebrate the story of the Golden Pipeline.