



Turning of first sod for Trans-Aust Railway, 1912,  
State Library of South Australia.

# The Trans- Australian Railway

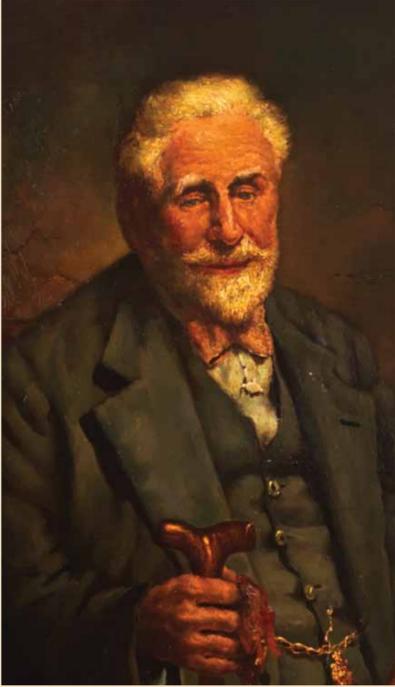
*Today we begin the new stretch of railway line welding, with ribs of steel and bands of iron, the eastern to the western shores of this continent.*

King O'Malley,  
*Trans-Australian railway souvenir*, 1912

As Minister for Home Affairs, King O'Malley had responsibility for the construction of Commonwealth railways. The promise to construct a trans-continental railway to link the east and west coasts of Australia had been an important factor in convincing Western Australia to join Federation. Prior to the completion of the railway, goods and people had to be transported via the rough seas of the Great Australian Bight. The new railway promised to accelerate mail times to the west and provide for the transport of large numbers of troops; an important consideration with the threat of war looming in Europe.

King O'Malley introduced to Parliament the *Kalgoorlie to Port Augusta Railway Act* which enabled the appropriation of revenue for building to commence. The first sod of the railway was turned by Lord Denman at Port Augusta on 14th September 1912 and an impressive souvenir publication was issued to commemorate the event. O'Malley was criticised for his management of the project and a Royal Commission reported on the affair in 1913. Although there was no wrongdoing proved on O'Malley's part his handling of the project, especially regarding the appointment of staff, was seen as naive and clumsy.





Portrait of King O'Malley by Dudley Drew, 1953,  
Commonwealth Bank of Australia.

# Founding the Commonwealth Bank

*Without my work  
there would be no  
Commonwealth Bank.*

King O'Malley,  
*Commonwealth Bank, 1920*

If asked, King O'Malley would always say that his greatest achievement was the founding of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, now the Reserve Bank. While historians differ over the extent to which he was responsible for the creation of the bank, O'Malley was certainly one of the bank's most vocal supporters and he can be credited with bringing the issue to a head within the Labor Party. From his earliest political days he had supported the creation of a Government-owned bank which would regulate the economy through control of the issue of paper money, finance the debts of the Commonwealth and the States and concentrate their borrowing power.

*The Commonwealth Bank Act* of 1911 finally established a national bank which conducted savings and general banking, but did not have a central banking role and did not control the note issue. The bank would evolve to take over these roles during the next 48 years, and in 1960 the central banking functions of the Commonwealth Bank were transferred to the new Reserve Bank of Australia.





King O'Malley by Hal Gye, 1910, National Library of Australia.

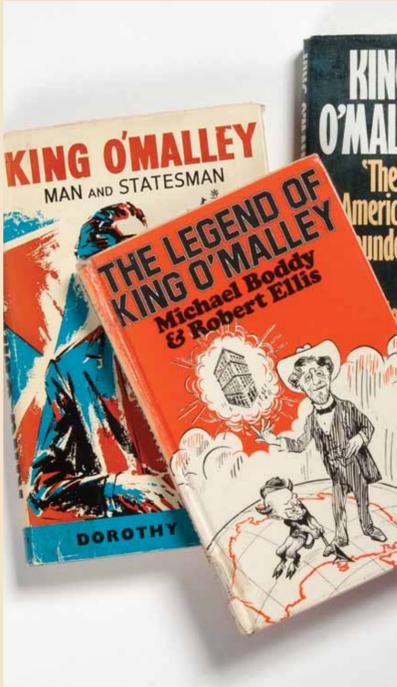
## Building the Legend of King O'Malley

After his retirement from politics, King O'Malley spent the rest of his life building his own legend and ensuring his legacy. He religiously followed the fortunes of the Commonwealth Bank, advocating reform to make it into the bank he had proposed so many years ago. He also wrote self-promoting pamphlets regarding his achievements and pushed his message through the newspapers and radio.

King O'Malley died at home in Albert Park, Melbourne on 20 December, 1953. His age was reported as 99, in line with the stories he had told towards the end of his life. In a sign of how far O'Malley's reputation as a senior politician had come, he was awarded a state funeral.

His name lives on in Canberra through King O'Malley's pub and also through the suburb of O'Malley which, ironically for the man who saw himself as the greatest supporter of the working class, is a suburb full of grand houses and embassies.





Publications about King O'Malley, photo by RLDI.

# The Legend of King O'Malley

In 1970 *The Legend of King O'Malley* was performed by NIDA at Sydney's Jane Street Theatre. This play was written by Bob Ellis and Michael Boddy using O'Malley's life as the basis for discussing contemporary issues of conscription and the Australian political system. Although set in the early twentieth century, the play's themes resonated with a generation struggling with the Vietnam War and its own political crises.

The two-act musical and burlesque comedy opens in the form of a meeting of the revivalist Waterlily Rockbound Church and follows O'Malley's supposed career in the United States. Followed to Australia by his alter ego, Angel, O'Malley eventually makes his way to the first federal parliament: a troupe of tired vaudeville artists led by Billy Hughes. Later, O'Malley is alienated from Hughes over the conscription issue and loses his seat, but outlasts them all and when he dies is taken off to the next world accompanied by a rousing hymn from the chorus. The play was seen as a turning point in Australian theatre, revitalising the genre. It won numerous awards and continues to be performed in the present day.





Dr Jauncey, King O'Malley, Dr Maloney and Mrs O'Malley in the O'Malley's living room, c.1940s, National Library of Australia

*Continue exploring the legend of King O'Malley by attending one of our community programs:*

### DIRECTOR'S FLOOR TALK

Wednesday 16 November 2011, 12.30–1.30pm

### CURATOR'S FLOOR TALK

Wednesday 22 February 2012, 12.30–1.30pm

### MUSEUM ASSISTANT FLOOR TALKS: *HIGHLIGHTS*

Tuesday 13 December 2011, 11.00am

Tuesday 17 January 2012, 11.00am

### *CARICATURE: A CONVERSATION*

Thursday 24 November 2011, 12.30–1.30pm

*RSVP: by Tues 22 November, limited seating available*

### SPECIAL FORUM

### *KING O'MALLEY: SHOWMAN OR VISIONARY?*

Thursday 1 March 2012, 10.00–12.00pm

*RSVP: by Mon 27 Feb, for catering purposes, limited seating available*

