

## DOREEN OF THE PILBARA

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*Millstream-Chichester National Park, Pilbara WA*

*The Tyranny of Distance*<sup>1</sup> is the classic account of how Australia's geographic remoteness has been central to shaping our history and identity - and how it will continue to form our future. The revised and updated edition of this book by Geoffrey Blainey examines how distance and isolation from Europe (especially Britain), the Americas and also Asia, have been vital to Australia's development, even in the 21st century 'global village'. The final chapter of the book is titled 'Is Distance Dead?' and Blainey concludes that though Australia's remoteness from some other parts of the world has been tamed by improved long distance transport and digital communication, distance is far from dead !

It is easy to see that Australia's problems with distance from other parts of the world are also present to some extent within the continent itself. Many major centres of population are clustered around the coast of this large island continent, and distances between inland towns, cities and settlements are often considerable. This was brought home to me recently when I visited the Daughters of Charity in the Pilbara region of north western Australia. A five hour flight from Sydney to Perth followed by another two hour flight north to Karratha left no doubt about the distances involved.

The Daughters of Charity in the Pilbara work in Roebourne, 40 km east of Karratha and in South Hedland, some two hours drive to the north east. In these two areas, and in the diocese of Geraldton, the Sisters are well regarded both on account of their presence and on account of their active ministry. Roebourne is largely populated by indigenous people, South Hedland by people who have mixed ethnic backgrounds. Parts of the countryside along the

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<sup>1</sup> Blainey, Geoffrey, *The Tyranny of Distance - How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Pan MacMillan, Sydney, Australia, 2001 (revis).

coastal area are fairly flat, but the landscape has its own beauty especially in the redness of the soil, the rock formations contrasting with the vegetation, and the brilliant blue sky.



Because of the distances that people have to travel, there can be a sense of isolation and loneliness for many people who live in these areas, even for those who have made their permanent homes there. Isolation of course can have many forms - physical, psychological, emotional and more. It can be isolation geographically, isolation from family and friends, from community, from familiar places and culture, and from where we have our roots. Because of the mining (iron ore and minerals) and gas production, many workers are fly-in fly-out and live in quite restricted accommodation. Their high wages put pressure on local accommodation and the cost of living. Fly-in fly-out workers are also isolated from their own families.

In Karratha, now classed as a city with a population of approximately 25,000 (it has absorbed towns like Roebourne and Wickham into its local government region), people, many of whom are relatively young, sometimes think of themselves as an isolated community, in spite of the improvements in digital communication and transport. Many have come from somewhere else, and they feel isolated from families, from their own culture, and from their roots. As already mentioned, some solve this problem by flying home to other cities every couple of weeks. Some see their presence in Karratha as temporary, and indeed, if they lose their job with a mining company, they may have to leave the area anyway because they cannot afford to pay rent when they have to depend on welfare while looking for work. So their sense of isolation is increased

In the course of my visit I met a number of indigenous people. Perhaps I expected the indigenous people who have their home and roots in the Pilbara not to be concerned by distance, and this would be the case for many. But even indigenous people can be cut off from the society in which they live. The Pilbara is certainly home for one lady I met who is known as "Doreen". As an indigenous lady, she is very much aware of the roots of indigenous people in the region, including where building development has taken place over what are said to be aboriginal burial grounds. Doreen lives alone, and is currently confined to a wheelchair. So she experiences her own form of isolation which has nothing to do with distance. I accompanied one of the Daughters of Charity on a visit to Doreen to take a meal to her as meals-on-wheels does not operate at the weekend. Doreen seemed more

interested in our company than in the meal, and talked non-stop for the duration of our visit. She did not complain about her lot or the fact that family were not around. In a sense, she was isolated, but she dealt with her isolation by enjoying the occasional visits of local people, and perhaps above all by listening to the radio. She was quite up to date with political and religious matters, and conversed very intelligently about current affairs. Though she suffered from isolation, it certainly did not break her spirit. I came away very impressed by the the calibre of such a woman. With the help of relationships and communication with people, and well as staying in contact with what was happening in the world by radio, Doreen seemed able to cope in her own somewhat isolated situation.

While focussing on distance as a cause of isolation and loneliness, at the same time I was reminded that we don't have to be separated by distance to be isolated or lonely. To be separated by lack of communication, lack of freedom, lack of relationships, can all bring about isolation and loneliness. So spare a thought for all those in the Pilbara, and indeed in other parts of our large and varied country, who make up that number of people who are cut off from society in some way because they are homeless, residents of nursing homes and hostels, in prison, refugees in detention centres, people confined indoors with serious health problems, or separated by discrimination of some sort. Even indigenous people can be isolated and cut off from society in a country where their ancestors were the first inhabitants.

Several centuries ago, in the early days of the Company of the Daughters of Charity in France, Louise de Marillac kept in contact with the isolated groups of Sisters (sometimes in groups as small as two) with constant letters to them expressing concern for their welfare, their religious and spiritual lives, and other practical aspects. She expected them to respond to her letters, thus ensuring an ongoing personal relationship with them, even though in those days such correspondence may have been spread over several months. For those of us who are not isolated, and perhaps even for those who are, the challenge will be there in many forms to help people who feel separated and cut off. Communication and maintenance of relationships are just some of the ways where we can be of assistance to those who experience a sense of isolation from whatever source it happens to come.



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## FOR REFLECTION

1. Can you think of other types of isolation and loneliness beyond those mentioned here.
2. Have you ever experienced isolation yourself ? Or felt cut off from others ? How have you dealt with these times of isolation and loneliness ?

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