Ali Abdul v The King

Muslim stories from the dark days of White Australia

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In memory of my sister

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Author’s Note

Once upon a time ‘research’ was a word that intimidated the uninitiated because it was confined to the halls of academia and meant thick books bearing impossibly long titles stuck on library shelves in places where you were not allowed to talk – even smiling was suspect. Today the word has a populist meaning; the gates have opened wide and all may enter. For some people, reading a recipe is undertaking research, tracking down your family genealogy requires definite research skills, we talk about ‘doing our research’ before buying a lawnmower, washing machine or four-wheel drive. At long last research has come to the people; and rightfully so.

Australians, however, are still wary of approaching some research institutions – our state and national archives for instance. Public records are often seen as inert piles of dusty papers. But the wonderful world of the archive links the time traveller to a metaphorical YouTube: a place to discover, view, upload and share – almost like a blog where you speak to the past and the past answers back.

When I first visited the National Archives of Australia in 2006 I understood that I’d be stepping into new terrain but I underestimated the archival holdings. Australian Muslims had left behind a paper trail and underneath all the paperwork lay a hidden history. I walked into an unknown world of documents: reports, correspondence, forms, briefing papers and memos; some never meant to see the light of day when first penned and perhaps, on their own, not the most exciting of materials. A tapestry waited to be stitched together. Patience, imagination – and stamina – were the threads; forensic skills a sharp needle.
All I needed was the right password and, like an Aladdin’s cave, the entrance would swing open to reveal its treasures and its secrets…When I realised that these papers were all ‘mine’ for the taking – figuratively speaking, that is – I felt a rush of adrenalin.

Documents spanning more than seven decades lay before me in disarray: Afghans, Indians, Malays, Albanians, Yugo-Slavs, Turks, Arabic-speakers from Egypt and elsewhere, and the Lebanese in the mid 1970s. As a first step I completed a survey from the 1890s to 1975. Finally, for the purposes of this book, I decided to focus on the men and watershed events from the 1890s to the 1940s. My own identity formed a piece of the tapestry: stories I’d heard as a child, faces remembered and taken for granted, arguments I’d listened to – the archival material stirred memories.

Then came the difficult part – hundreds of incredibly handsome faces stared back at me from official photos. Who would I take with me? Who’d be left behind? I needed to be ‘discriminating’ – and disciplined. I was morphing into a wise King Solomon of the archives!

Abandoning the notion of using a set of criteria to help me decide who to ‘marry’ and who to leave at the altar, I decided to select my men on the basis of ‘a writer’s intuition’, that inner voice that many writers swear by. I gravitated towards the ‘troublemakers’ of this period: the Afghans, the cameleers, hawkers, and pearl divers who, according to popular opinion and government policy, didn’t belong in a white man’s country.

These men with dark skins and turbans didn’t look foreign to me at all. We were connected; they were a part of my heritage. Childhood memories, family stories, and a revisionist history of British India my parents spoke about at the kitchen table meant they were no strangers to me. The immigration laws and attitudes of the time helped shape me as I grew up in search of an identity. There were few reflections of myself in the small world around me; I lacked a feeling of ‘community’. The White Australia Policy was a household word in my family – we’d butted heads with its rules and regulations, on and off, over the years. By the time I was eight or nine I knew that some people were discriminated against: skin colour, religion, and ethnicity were markers that fashioned other people’s attitudes towards us. Furthermore, when I gazed at the men in the archives, many of them looked like my dad or my uncles and I knew that in a smaller way I shared an empathy borne of experience with these men; the important difference being that I was born here and
knew no other home; I was an Australian citizen protected by the law. I wasn’t a problem like my men from the archives.

Looking for connections to the past that never appeared in history books, before long, I found them a lot closer to home than I’d anticipated. My investigation took me from the past to the present, for now and then I couldn’t stop myself from joining in as part of the cast – not a Greek chorus exactly, but a Punjabi-Kashmiri-Welsh choir. I also met others affected by that early generation: men and women who claimed a kinship with the early cameleers and a new breed of researchers fascinated by these old links.

At times I stepped into the world of fiction: drifting into the romantic imperialism of Rudyard Kipling who knew all about Queen, Country and the British Empire. I also revisited Henry Lawson as I looked for traces of ‘my men’ in his bush stories. Through these side excursions, I came to a better understanding of the grand Oz mythology we’ve invented over the years and of why some people were overlooked – or ignored.

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You may find a favourite from among my characters as they face an establishment unsympathetic towards them by law or inclination – sometimes both: immigration officials, crown prosecutors, doctors, pastoralists, politicians, unionists, journalists, professional agitators, teamsters, pearling bosses. Some antagonists were genuinely fearful of losing out – others represented more cynical interests. Yet on every occasion there were people capable of seeing past the façade of skin colour, accent and difference: a small minority of Anglo and European Australians willing to speak up for the ‘strangers’ when they might have walked away and pretended that nothing was wrong.

I hope by the end of the book my men will have emerged as individuals and have lost that anonymity that helped to marginalise them: no longer the ‘Ghans’, the ‘sepoys’ or the cameleers, the hawkers and herbalists, the pearl divers, the shop keepers and ‘Mohammedans’, but individuals with stories to tell. These stories may even help explain some of the moral ambiguities and strange ironies that still trouble us today.

Hanifa Deen
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Muslim fishermen and traders first came to our shores in the eighteenth century, or even earlier, from the eastern islands of modern Indonesia. They sailed their prahus along our north and north-western coast fishing for trepang and trading for pearls and pearl shell with the Aborigines – a cross-cultural interaction that carried on for more than three centuries.

Over time, the fishermen from Macassar in southern Sulawesi left behind traces of their language in the vocabularies of local tribes near Darwin and further south along the coastline. Later, British expeditions in the nineteenth century noted another legacy in certain physical features denoting mixed descendants of the Macassans and local Aboriginal tribes.

With European colonisation, the free and easy ways of the trepang trade was bound to change. The imposition of Customs’ dues, jealousy over the trepang trade, and anti-Asian attitudes after 1901 gradually severed the old historical links.

The Indonesians and Malays came and went like the winds that assisted their canoes and trawlers. It was not until the mid nineteenth century that a new breed of Muslim was drawn to our shores – in many ways as stubborn as the camels they came to tend.
A tribe of strangers lived within Australia’s gate during the years when entry was restricted to people of European ancestry. Race and the colour of one’s skin were used to classify people and echoed the meaning phrased so succinctly in Kipling’s verse. The men I speak of arrived in the years before Australia’s inaugural Immigration Restriction Act 1901. But even in the 1890s the Afghans, Indians and Malays – and of course the Chinese before them – represented a threat to different vested interests around the country.

My men selected from the archives were fortunate because with one exception they’d all arrived in the years preceding 1901 and the advent of an immigration policy that barred men and women of their ilk. However, though legally entitled to stay here as residents, they were unwelcome and seen as a threat to the Australian worker.

A man could find any number of reasons to resent these ‘aliens’, as they were officially stamped in documents: any commercial success they might enjoy for one, especially if times were hard and you found yourself struggling. And there was something else, sometimes voiced and sometimes unspoken – but revealed in a sneer or a dirty look – the strong antagonism felt towards dark-skinned men who married
or formed relationships with white women. Miscegenation was not illegal, but these liaisons led to sexual jealousy at a time when men vastly outnumbered women in Australia: the ratio of men to women in WA in 1897 was 10:1; in NSW, as late as 1938, there were four men to every woman and in rural areas the imbalance extended to 20:1. Many of these dark interlopers were young handsome men, in the prime of their lives. In the thirty years between 1890 and 1920, the newspapers were full of tabloid stories about Afghan and Chinese men lusting after European women. Liaisons between Indigenous women and the men were less public and ‘hardly worth’ commenting about. Lascivious stories claimed a white slave trade flourished; wives were abused and sold. The ‘dirty mongrels’ would even sell off their own daughters, a clumsy reference to the custom of *mehr* (the dowry paid by the groom to his bride).

Afghan or Malay, Indian or Turk, what was the difference? Mindsets were entrenched. In pubs, clubs and around campfires they were all tarred with the same brush – all part of the same problem.

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‘The Afghan problem’ in the late nineteenth century was as much talked about in Australia, and as hotly debated, as the subject of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants is today. The Indians and Afghans who had entered Australia as cameleers in the 1880s and 1890s soon wore out their welcome as the urge to keep Australia white and get rid of Asians grew year by year as the colonies headed towards federation. Non-Caucasian races could be used for menial tasks but must never threaten the working conditions of white Australians.

Camels were not native to Australia and neither were the cameleers. On 9 June 1860, three exotic-looking Afghan camel men landed at Port Melbourne from Karachi with twenty or so animals as part of the ultimately disastrous Burke and Wills expedition organised by the Royal Society of Victoria’s ‘Exploration Committee’. The ill-fated journey, however, proved the merit of camel over horse and bullock. Over the next ten years, British entrepreneurs imported significant numbers of camels with their handlers, and more animals were unloaded at Derby and Fremantle in WA, Port Augusta in SA and Port Melbourne in Victoria. The camels showed their worth: opening up of remote inland
areas, carting bales of wool and other goods to inland pastoral regions and they proved invaluable on numerous exploration parties. Gradually, as their mobility and endurance gained recognition, camels were increasingly used in isolated areas around Australia.

The animal was made for the desert. There was no other animal in its class; horses and buffalo died through lack of water, but camels survived; some were freaks capable of carrying a load of 900 pounds. But if they were to be harnessed and put to good use, experienced handlers not to be found in Australia were needed and so the Afghans were ‘imported’ along with the camels and were tolerated, at least at the beginning.

The ‘Ghans’ were here on sufferance to do a job nobody else could do at the time. By the 1890s Muslim camel drivers and hawkers were common sights along country roads and inland routes from Kalgoorlie to Broken Hill and beyond. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus were also lumped together with the Afghans; most people were ignorant of their religious differences and as the Sikhs and many of the Hindus were Punjabis, they spoke the same language and shared certain customs with Muslim Punjabis. (This was fifty or so years before the horrors of Partition in 1947 following independence and the ethnic cleansing indulged in by all sides as India and Pakistan came into existence). In the eyes of the public they all ‘looked the same’ – they certainly sounded the same with their ‘foreign jabber’ and their Pidgin English. In Australia ‘Afghan’ became a generic term used to describe any Asian engaged in the camel business, whether or not they were from India, Afghanistan, Egypt or even Turkey – did it really matter? Not to most Australians.

In reality the men belonged to different ethnic, tribal and linguistic groupings which proved too much for European Australians to comprehend, except for a small number of former English, Irish and Scottish army officers and civil servants who’d served Queen and Country loyally in British India but who, at the end of their service, had emigrated from the mother country to Australia. Most drivers hailed from different provinces of what later became Pakistan (Baluchistan, Punjab, the Sindh, the North West Frontier Province) and the protectorate Kingdom of Afghanistan. They continued to maintain their identities (and at times their tribal and ethnic tensions) through their languages, dialects and customs, including the different ways they fashioned
their beards and moustaches and tied their turbans. Such nuances, however, went unnoticed by Caucasian Australians who naïvely added insult to injury by interspersing the usual ham-fisted descriptors with terms like ‘Hindoos’ and ‘sepoys’. Through visiting seamen, gazettes and word of mouth, settlers in the Australian colonies knew all about the ‘Indian Mutiny’ of 1857 and ‘traitorous’ sepoys. These suspicions were strengthened forty years later, in some quarters, by allegations that mullahs entering Australia were raising subscriptions for Afghan tribesmen fighting their British soldier enemies in the Anglo-Afghan Wars in the late nineteenth century.

Between 1870 and 1920 approximately 20,000 camels and 2000 to 3000 (some books cite as many as 4000) cameleers landed at ports around Australia and a vast network of camel routes spread across inland Australia. Camels arrived in their hundreds from Karachi, Bombay and Calcutta and excited crowds flocked to the wharves to see the disgruntled – and certainly disoriented – dromedaries suspended in the air and lowered slowly one by one on to the docks after a long sea trip.

The spectacle was almost as good as a visit to a travelling circus of the period: the hustle and bustle, the motley looking crew dressed in pantaloons, long shirts, colourful vests and turbans, speaking ‘funny’ languages, and always the chance that one of those peculiar-looking, long necked, hump-backed animals, dangling in the air as it was off-loaded, always the chance it might fall into the sea...

The camel’s hump is an ugly lump
Which well you may see at the Zoo;
But uglier yet is the hump we get
From having too little to do.

(The Camel’s Hump, a popular children’s verse by Rudyard Kipling written in 1890)

The more I read about camels the more they stirred my imagination until I, too, was tempted to dedicate an ode to the camel. I wilfully ignored the fact that today feral camels are Australia’s number one inland pest.

With each large consignment of camels came sixty or more cameleers who camped with their charges during the quarantine period, after
which both parties were permitted to move on with their new lives. And in the wake of the cameleers came the young Indian hawkers, merchants and small businessmen with big ideas – both my grandfathers among them.

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Who could have dreamt at the onset of the first Afghan–Australian connection that some of the camel men might stay behind? Politicians, officials, or the man on the street (if the latter thought about it at all) assumed that they would all return one day to wherever they had come from. Certainly some men lived an adventure of a lifetime, saved their money, finished their contracts, went on haji to Mecca and then returned to their homeland. The once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage would have remained an unfulfilled dream if they’d not been adventurous enough to look beyond their villages. Those who dared to leave could one day return home transformed miraculously into hajis, men of money and status with exotic tales to tell, stories about strange animals and stranger people.

The more astute men entered the camel business as entrepreneurs involved in the buying and selling side of the camel trade, expanding their cartage businesses, sometimes forming partnerships with Europeans. The camel haulage business was at its peak from the mid 1890s to 1905 and run by Afghan men resident in Australia between ten and twenty years. Abdul Wade owned 400 camels and employed more than sixty men; the brothers Faiz and Taigh Mahomet and their rival Gunny Khan were also legends in the business. They employed their less educated, less well-off (and certainly less well-paid) countrymen to work the camel pads across vast tracts of Australia. But once Afghans and Indians entered the haulage trade as business owners in their own right and ceased to be menials, they began attracting the animosity of officials, unions and working men with aspirations of their own – suddenly they became ‘a problem’.

Cameleers undertook what needed to be done when a country is being opened up: accompanying expeditions hastening to map the continent, carting wool to ports and barrels of water to drought-ridden areas, transporting mail, equipment and stores at a time when railway construction was in its infancy. The significant role they
played in facilitating the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line 1870–72 by carting equipment, material and supplies is now officially acknowledged. Without their services, Australia’s inland development would have lagged behind by at least fifty years until the era of improved roads, trucks and railway services led to machine power supplanting animal power.

Today with the eye of the historian we belatedly acknowledge their contribution, but in the late 1890s, to other men competing in the haulage business they signified unfair competition – ‘Get rid of the bastards’ was the answer! ‘Next to the dirty Chinks the Afghans take the cake...wives they have none and their morals are exceedingly questionable’, wrote one man in The Menzies Miner, 30 November 1897.

Australia’s burgeoning labour movement culminated in the foundation of the Australian Labor Party in 1891. The colonies were nearing federation. Inevitably, along with the Chinese, Afghans became seen as a threat to the white working-class and were the targets of vicious racism especially in WA, SA and Queensland. Ventures that had once prospered now began to fail (often for reasons beyond their control), instances occurred where port authorities refused permission to unload their animal cargo, and Afghan syndicates went bankrupt.

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Debates surrounding ‘the Afghan problem’ in the 1890s were becoming as inflammatory as ‘The Chinese Problem’ or ‘Mongolian Invasion’ as it was sometimes called by ‘learned gentlemen’ and not-so-learned gentlemen in editorials and letters from the 1850s through to the early 1900s. British immigrants made up more than half of the eastern goldfield’s 150,000 population that also included 40,000 Chinese. Chinese miners, furniture makers and market gardeners were accused of waging war against whites: their ‘weapons’ were cheap labour, (claims they could live on 4s 6d a week compared to 30s for a European) ‘a disgustingly low scale of social life, and the introduction of Asiatic vices’ (opium perhaps?) plus the spread of leprosy and small pox. At a Melbourne meeting of market gardeners chaired by a Moorabbin councillor reported in The Age in 1887, feelings ran high. A Chinese syndicate, it was alleged, was ready to send 500,000 Chinese workers to Victoria.
Henry Lawson’s short story *Send Around the Hat*, written in 1901, reveals there was no love lost for the Chinese or the Afghans according to his outback characters in Bourke: ‘…the teamsters loved the Afghans nearly as much as Sydney furniture makers love the cheap Chinese.’ Although one of Lawson’s characters, Giraffe, tries ‘sending around the hat’ for a sick Afghan (only to be kicked out of the pub by irate fellow-drinkers), most characters don’t much care for camels or their handlers; the latter are scabs undercutting wages and there’s talk of organisations like the Carriers’ Union being crushed; Lawson’s images and colloquial dialogue evoke this period.

During the late 1890s the idea of a White Australia was starting to sweep the country with an intense national fervour. Very soon the doors would be closed for anyone of the ‘wrong’ colour except for the occasional rich merchant or visiting prince. Inferior races were to be kept out of Australia by law, encompassing an early form of social engineering designed to replicate British and European societies. Australia would soon become independent and one of the first laws that the new Federal Parliament would pass was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, popularly known as the White Australia Policy, something still remembered by countries in the Indian Ocean and Pacific regions whose politicians and media have long memories and often refer to our past when strategically useful to score points.

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In the late 1880s, the Goldfields population in WA, was more concerned with the ‘Ghans’ – the Chinese banned from goldmining were no longer a major worry and were not involved in the haulage business. Wherever men gathered, in union offices, pubs, gold diggings, camps, railway heads, sooner or later (especially after a beer or two) the conversation turned to those ‘Asians’ who posed a threat to the livelihood and interests of the white Australian working class. White-collar workers who liked to think themselves a cut above the rest might watch their language and hide their prejudice by talking about ‘the Afghan problem’ in pseudo-scientific Darwinian terms, pontificating on the hypothesis that the survival of the fittest proved that the theory of Social Darwinism was correct – white blood was vastly superior to the blood of inferior races. Men who worked with their hands in the
bush or diggings might use more colourful language and were open
to clever manipulation by educated travelling polemicists – but no
matter what the vocabulary or degree of passion, the bigotry remained
the same.

I’m prepared to argue that by any standards *The Bulletin* cartoons and
newspaper letters to the editor were rabidly racist. Others will disagree.
‘After all these were the standards of the time’, the voices say. ‘Where’s
your empathy with history?’

I’ll fire back, by calling this a flawed argument. Standing on my
soapbox I’ll refer to Christian standards of the time exhorting us to
‘Love thy neighbour’ and the humanist-enlightenment principles
lecturing us on the brotherhood of humanity. A kind of juggling act
was under way in our circus of morality: principles of love and charity
floating in the air along with racism and intolerance – how confusing –
someone was bound to drop something! Colonialism and Christianity
often partnered each other. When we look at the history of the USA,
South Africa and our own, it becomes clearer that escaping a racist past
is often a work in progress – it takes time.

...We object to servile labour of all kinds, and my reason for giving
special prominence to the believers in Islam, is that they are at present
the most unpleasantly conspicuous and obnoxious of the servile races. At
the same time I admit that I should regard the establishment of Islamism
in this country as being nothing short of a national calamity.

(Editor/activist Frederick Vosper, *The Inquirer* 3 May 1895)

Minority views opposing Vosper-like sentiments in this period
of our history were not publicly articulated; people kept them to
themselves. In their daily dealings with Afghans, many people behaved
with basic decency but this did not prevent them from holding views
of racial supremacy.

You could always raise a snigger or two by ridiculing the Afghan’s
appearance. Comparing turbans with ‘knitted tea cosies’ was a popular
jibe, of course their English was a joke, and if all else failed, people
would fall over laughing when you told stories about how you tricked
the ‘Mohammedans’ into carrying bacon – when you told them (as you
always did), their outrage was so comical!
We were a young nation – barely out of the toddler stage – inexperienced but ready to take on the world with just a quick sideways glance to make sure that the mother country approved. Our feelings of nationalism were increasing, merged with a determination to forge a nation in the image of Britain and the rest of Europe. Our folklore and mythologies were taking wing: stories, songs, poems and a daily account of local happenings and events carried in the early papers, then into the streets and people’s homes; dark turbaned men were strangers and excluded from the self portraits we were painting. The will to survive was strong but life beyond the black stump meant being locked into a level of anxiety: droughts, bushfires, crop failure, fear of becoming lost, jobless and destitute.

Settlers might think of themselves as ‘civilised’ but Australia was a frontier country where many single men lived a life without the company of women other than prostitutes or other marginalised women, both white and Indigenous.

A man might be well-known and wealthy like camel entrepreneur Gunny Khan and Mahomet Allum herbalist extraordinaire; or suit-and-tie Muslims like my grandfathers, but there was a line – and that line was not meant to be crossed. As many as three thousand cameleers, like the feisty Afghan Rock men, once worked in Australia. Hawkers and itinerant labourers worked hard in the bush and some battlers like Ali Abdul found friendship and justice in the end. But hundreds of law-abiding, honest and decent men were not as lucky as the Redfern shopkeeper. Years later Malay activist and pearl diver, Samsudin, lost everything when ‘the best interests of Australia’ won out – again.

Their are just a few of the untold stories from the dark days of White Australia when a tribe of strangers entered through our gate; men easily recognisable by the colour of their skin, ‘but not the soul behind’.