

BOOK REVIEW

Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland, 1860s – 1930s

Philip Jones and Anna Kenny

(A South Australian Museum travelling exhibition)

By choosing to expand and extend the life of a museum exhibition in publishing a book that uses the collected exhibits as its main narrative, the creators of *Australia's Muslim Cameleers* have inevitably produced a hybrid—something between a souvenir catalogue and a standard historical research account. Both ends of the project produce pleasing outcomes. Here, in attractively designed album style of just under two hundred pages, we have a permanent image and text record that will endure, giving visual and cultural substance to a relatively unsung aspect of Australia's diverse identity.

The book's stylish design immediately appeals, the photographs and other illustrations being carefully treated for presentation and sharpness in a variety of ways such as tints and textures. Placement on the page is approached creatively and there is generous use of well-drawn maps for context and clarity, they too having the luxury of a conscientious designer's eye.

Generally, the book is a valuable addition to the history of the Islamic presence in Australia, albeit the cameleers being a small Muslim minority. As such, after being initially accepted by European Australians, they faced eventual discrimination and tensions despite their acknowledged efficiency and contributions to exploratory expeditions (the book suggests the Burke and Wills Expedition marked the advent of camels in Australia) and the transporting of goods. These tensions were generally the result of grazing, water rights and competition with bullock drivers.

The subject of Australia's Muslim cameleers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, holds a potency that the authors of the text are quick to underscore. They contextualise the stories and experiences of the "Afghan" cameleers against a background that includes the recent growth of interest in Islam in the wake of religious fundamentalist expansion and conflict and the fanning of racism. But they also express the belief that the cameleers present a significant and colourful episode in the nation's development as a diverse society rather than a monoculture.

This is where the text of the narrative takes us in its general overview that draws as one would expect on previous valuable works such as Christine Stevens' *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns*, Michael Cigler's *Afghans in Australia* and Pamela Rajkowski's *In the tracks of the camelmens: Outback Australia's most exotic pioneers*, amongst many others. The reference publications list attests to first class research. However, this reader was left wanting more from the text and perhaps less from the photographic bank, which in book design terms sometimes appears repetitive, despite it being a rich archival source. It is likely, however, that there is little more narrative than exists in these pages. End of story? But what happened in the conflicts with the rival bullock trains for the overland freight business? And what really lay behind the tragic events

at Broken Hill on New Year's Day, 1915? These are just two stories that still await research and fuller recounting.

The point about the photographic record is that similar images appear regularly as the intention is, it seems, to produce an archive rather than illustrate a narrative. This is not a quibble because the illustrations produce a rich and engaging collection that by their publication becomes the property of the reader. Moreover, when the narrative is under way it enriches and illuminates. Much of the narrative detail relies on and lies in the detailed captions. As such you are left to piece together an intriguing and multi-layered story of this formative period in Central Australia, which emerges almost by osmosis from the pages of illustrations and their captions.

Cameleering was biggish business and produced business operatives as well as a working camel-riding coterie. These agents, often "Afghanis" themselves acted as middle-men. This kind of textual historical information is enlightening. The home country was not necessarily Afghanistan as such, as we know it today, but extended to what was British India. It thus produced diverse ethnicities among the cameleers including Pashtun, Baluchi, Punjabi, and Sindhi. The incidentals of the story are also engaging. This reader learned both a new collective noun, "a string of camels" and about the debt owed to cameleers for early transportation across the Centre and exploration of the interior. The images clearly showed nineteenth century Australia as a camel-laden landscape much akin to the Khyber Pass or the edge of Arabia.

The book's other attributes also make it work as a true historical archive. Of particular interest is the biographical listing of the cameleers themselves, with frequent photo portraits where they exist. So we have their names and biographical details for posterity and we know what many of them looked like. There is a good deal of detail about the cameleers and their associates and this personalisation makes for good history. But again I was often left wanting more information, having been tantalised with intrigue. Perhaps this is the sign of a good book. This is not, then, a criticism of Jones and Kenny's work, which is a tour de force of research and a task and subject to which they obviously warmed greatly. Both authors are steeped in the subject matter and as such lend authority to text. Leaving a reader wishing to learn more is thus something of a two-edged sword.

Hawker and merchant Mohammed Bux is a case in point. We learn that he stowed away to Melbourne from Lahore as a 23-year-old in 1880, found his way to Perth, opened several shops and made his fortune before retiring back in Lahore and building a mosque he named 'Australia Mosque'. The mosque, of which we have a photograph, was demolished, it seems, in 1992, but we are left wondering why and learn little more about Mr. Bux except that he had a "remarkable life".

The book's interest level lifts perceptibly at the section that gives an account of the cameleers encounters with those other marginalised Central Australians, the Aboriginal people of the centre. Again the photographs and their captions lead the story, which is one where one discriminated-against group finds common ground with another. The tribulations of Jack Akbar and his Aboriginal wife, Lalli, is indicative when faced with the decision of the West Australian Protector of Aborigines that their liaison was illegal.

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There are so many personal stories tucked away amongst the photographs in this book that it works, like an album, as a book you can put down and come back to after a while to enjoy again and re-capture a hitherto lost period in Australia's undoubted colourful 19th and 20th century history. By the end you, uncannily, feel that you have been a witness to the era and that's an achievement for which any good documentary strives.

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