

INTRODUCTION

Until now there has not been a book published in this country that records the contribution of the "Afghan" camelmen to the opening up, growth and development of the Australian colonies. Yet for fifty years or so, between the 1860s and the 1920s, until they were replaced by the expanding network of the railway lines and the advent of the motor truck, the "Afghans" and their camel strings were the main and most reliable means of carrying and servicing in the continent's arid interior. Neither the well recognised and established bullock teamsters nor the horse and donkey carriers were capable of doing as much for the early pioneer settlers, graziers, pastoralists and miners who tempted fate by venturing into areas that no European people (apart from the explorers themselves) had experienced before. As explorers and surveyors pushed closer to the heart of the continent, so followed sheep and cattle pastoralists, transport carriers, hotelmen, telegraph station operators, merchants, forwarding agents, storekeepers, blacksmiths and stockmen. Many settlements, pastoral stations and mining areas would never have become permanent or semi-permanent communities without the camel strings.

The thousands of miles of camel tracks, known as "camel pads", did not always follow existing roads. They were a network — bringing together the many dispersed settlements around the gold-mining fields of Western Australia and connecting them to larger supply and coastal service centres; connecting the sheep properties of South Australia's far north; passing up the Strzelecki, Birdsville and Oodnadatta Tracks and over the borders into the Northern Territory; connecting the region of New South Wales west of the Darling River with southern and western Queensland.

Some of this country's earliest and most famous explorers — Ernest Giles, Colonel Egerton Warburton, William Gosse and Robert O'Hara Burke — used "Afghans" and camels in their expeditions. "Afghans" and camels worked on the Overland Telegraph Line, laid through the centre of this continent and providing a direct link to London. Australian pioneers who had financial interests in opening up the arid interior for pastoralism contracted "Afghans" to cart for their properties. These included Sir Thomas Elder, the first man to bring

out a large number of "Afghans" (mainly men from northern India who were of Afghan tribal origins), Nathaniel E. Phillipson, Peter Waite, Charles Bagot, Sir John Lewis and Sir Sidney Kidman.

The "Afghans" set up their own main centres of traffic and settlement — the "Ghan towns" — and in the more important ones they built mosques. These turbaned men, who prayed regularly at sunrise and sunset, who would not eat any creature's flesh unless it had been killed the way Allah required, who had to be buried a particular way, and who kept their womenfolk strictly out of sight, formed quite a contrast to the rest of the citizens of this country; yet they were as much a part of the history of the outback as was the bullocky, stockman, merchant, miner, pastoralist and drover.

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