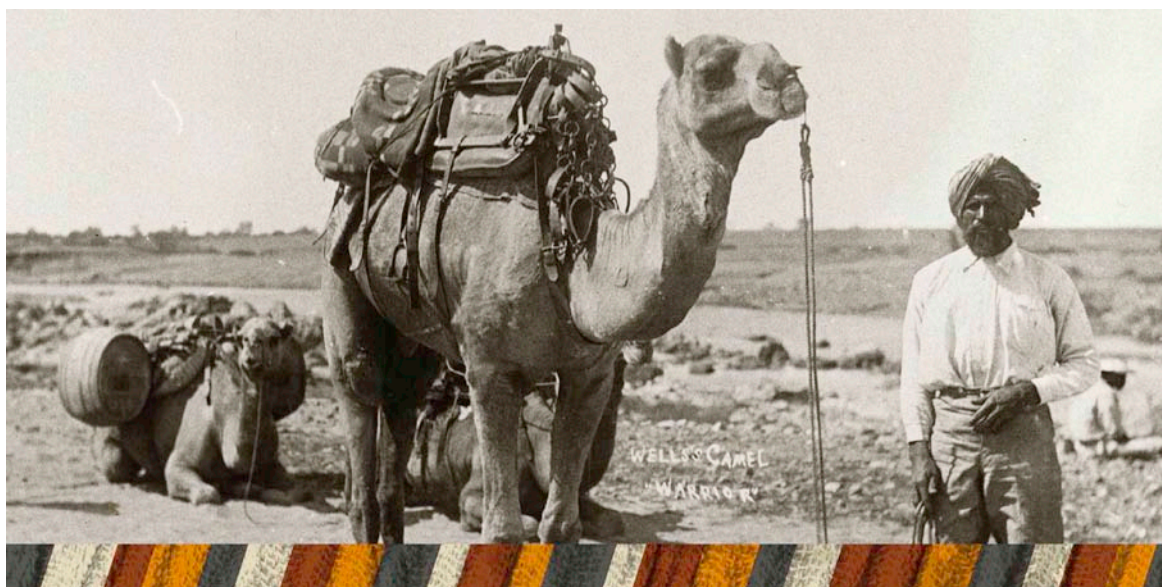


# *Australia's Muslim Cameleers*

## *Pioneers of the Inland 1860s-1930s*



Bejah Dervish at Mullewa, WA, leaving for the Calvert Expedition, 1896  
Source: State Library of South Australia

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Teachers may copy these materials for classroom use.

*Australia's Muslim Cameleers* is a South Australian Museum travelling exhibition.





## Teacher notes

*Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s-1930s* explores 80 years of Muslim society in Australia and traces the little-known heritage of the Muslim cameleers who first arrived in 1860 to aid expeditions into outback Australia. These men from Afghanistan and the part of British India that is now Pakistan travelled over thousands of kilometres of desert tracks to open up the country and make possible the creation of new inland communities.

The first Muslim cameleers arrived at Port Melbourne on 9 June 1860 to join the Burke and Wills expedition. 2010 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this ill-fated venture. The expedition was the first in Australia to use camels, and despite its failure, it successfully demonstrated the ability of camels to survive the harsh Australian conditions. From the 1860s to the 1920s it is estimated that at least 20,000 camels and more than 2,000 cameleers arrived in Australia.

'*Australia's Muslim Cameleers* explores a fascinating, but fragmentary history of an era that has almost slipped from view, but which has been critically important in Australia's national story', said Philip Jones, Curator at the South Australian Museum, where the exhibition was developed.

'The exhibition brings together previously unrecognised and dispersed heritage objects and images, confirming the pioneering role of the cameleers throughout inland Australia'.

*Australia's Muslim Cameleers* features beautiful historical photographs, film, artworks and oral histories. It exhibits objects such as camel saddle packs, textiles and other artefacts, portraits of the early cameleers and paintings that reflect interactions between the cameleers and Aboriginal people.

Over a period of more than five decades, Australia's Muslim cameleers were instrumental in opening lines of supply, transport and communications between isolated settlements. Along the way they enriched the cultural landscape, and while many returned to their homelands others stayed and built families. *Australia's Muslim Cameleers* tells the story of their legacy and the important part they played in Australia's multicultural heritage.

***Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s-1930s***

**26 February to 19 September 2010  
Immigration Museum, 400 Flinders Street, Melbourne**

**Adults \$8, children and concession FREE**

## Essential preparation

We suggest that teachers preview the exhibition or attend a teacher preview and information session at the museum prior to organising a class visit. This will provide ideas for preparing students for their visit, and help identify the ways in which the exhibition links to classroom curriculum requirements.

Teacher previews are free but bookings are essential (Telephone 9927 2754).

### Previews

Tuesday 2 March	3.00-4.30 pm
Thursday 4 March	3.00-4.30pm
Tuesday 20 April	3.00-4.30pm
Tuesday 27 April	3.00-4.30pm

Student groups of 10 or more will need to be booked in for a visit.

Students visiting the exhibition will be able to use the self guided activity trails which should be downloaded prior to the excursion.

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/education/education-programs/australias-muslim-cameleers/>

When your group arrives at the museum, a member of the Customer Service Team will introduce the exhibition and suggest ways to make the most of your visit.

**All student and teacher programs must be booked in advance:**

**Telephone 03 99272754 from 8.30am – 5.00pm Monday to Friday.**



Loading camels at Marree, ca. 1901  
Source: State Library of South Australia

## Curriculum links

The exhibition *Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s–1930s* provides a resource for specific subject areas in the primary and secondary curriculum and offers the opportunity to support rich learning tasks.

### VELS Curriculum links for Levels 4-6

Level	Strands	Domains	Exhibition
Level 3	Physical, Personal and Social Learning	Interpersonal Development	<i>Students demonstrate respect for each other; they support each other by sharing ideas and materials. Students work in teams. They build on their understanding of Australian society and investigate some of the different cultural groups. They are able to demonstrate an understanding of the contribution of people from culturally diverse groups that make up Australia.</i>
		Civics and Citizenship	
	Discipline Based Learning	Humanities	<i>Students examine the histories of the cultural groups represented in their class, community and nation. Students use a range of historical evidence including oral history, artefacts, narratives and pictures to retell events and describe historical characters.</i>
Level 4	Physical, Personal and Social Learning	Interpersonal Development	<i>The exhibition offers an opportunity for students to engage with the diversity of individual experiences in our nation's history and the contribution to the Australian identity and values in relation to issues of respect, tolerance and social harmony.</i>
		Civics and Citizenship	
	Discipline Based Learning	Humanities	<i>Students have the opportunity to describe elements of the colonisation of Australia and the impact of settlement. They develop an understanding of the histories of the cultural groups which have contributed to the Australian Identity.</i>
Level 4	Interdisciplinary learning	Thinking	<i>Visiting the exhibition provides students with the opportunity to ask questions, develop interpretations and provide reasons to support them. They use information collected in the exhibition to develop concepts, solve problems and inform decision making.</i>
		Communication	
		Design, Creativity and Technology	

Level	Strand	Domains	Exhibition
Level 5	Physical, Personal and Social Learning	Interpersonal Development	<p><i>Students interact with others in a shared public space. They participate in activities which enable them to identify the differing values and beliefs held by individuals in local and global contexts, and reflect on the impact these may have on their relationships.</i></p> <p><i>Interacting with the ideas and information presented in the exhibition offers students the opportunity to reflect on matters of social justice, human rights and the origins of Australian citizenship.</i></p>
		Civics and Citizenship	
	Interdisciplinary learning	Thinking	<p><i>The exhibition provides stimulus material for discussion, writing and visual communication. Students have the opportunity to engage with cultural objects, photographs and information related to the lives of the Muslim Cameleers.</i></p>
		Communication	
Design, Creativity and Technology			
Level 6	Physical, Personal and Social Learning	Interpersonal Development	<p><i>Attendance at the exhibition offers students the opportunity to explore barriers to achieving positive relationships, especially between groups with differing values and beliefs, and discuss the importance of empathy.</i></p>
		Civics and Citizenship	
	Discipline Based Learning	Humanities	<p><i>Engaging with the stories of the Cameleers offers students the opportunity to learn about the histories of the various people who live in Australia today and the events which contributed to Australia's social, political and cultural development.</i></p>
	Interdisciplinary learning	Thinking	<p><i>The exhibition provides stimulus material for discussion, writing and visual communication. Students can use the content of the exhibition to reflect on current attitudes, ideas of historical representation and the place of Muslims in Australian history.</i></p>
		Communication	
Design, Creativity and Technology			

## Exhibition Notes

### Pioneers of the Inland, 1860s-1930s

*Australia gained a small Muslim population nearly 150 years ago, when explorers and pastoralists began importing camels and their skilled handlers from Afghanistan and British India.*

Many cameleers returned home after their work contracts, but others stayed in Australia, establishing communities in outback towns from Bourke to Broome, and from Cloncurry to Coolgardie. Some cameleers married European and Aboriginal women, raising their children in the Islamic faith.

The skills of these 'Afghan' cameleers unlocked the Australian deserts. Their camel strings opened vital lines of supply and communication between coastal and inland towns, remote settlements, mines and mission stations. Inland Australia relied heavily on the cameleers' services until motor transport made them redundant during the 1920s and 1930s.

Today visible traces of the cameleers and their distinctive way of life have almost vanished.

This exhibition provides a record of their achievements and their contribution to Australian society.

### Who were the cameleers?

*Known in Australia as 'Afghans', the cameleers came mainly from the arid hills and plains of Afghanistan and that part of British India that is now Pakistan. They belonged to four main groups: the Pashtun, Baluchi, Punjabi, and Sindhi.*

Despite cultural and linguistic differences, the cameleers shared ancient skills. Many led semi-nomadic lives, carrying goods by camel-string along centuries-old trade routes through arid and harsh regions of Central Asia.

The cameleers also shared the Islamic religion, introduced to their homelands between the 7th and 10th centuries. This faith blended with local custom, such as the Pashtun code of honour, the Pashtunwali. Tribal differences played a role in Australia, but Islam was the common bond. Small iron or earthen-walled mosques provided a focus for daily prayer and religious festivals.

In Australia the cameleers spoke a mix of languages, reflecting their diverse origins. It is likely that Pashto, Dari (Persian), Baluchi, Punjabi, Sindhi and Urdu were heard in the streets of Kalgoorlie, Bourke and Marree.

Some cameleers were literate, while others relied upon oral tradition, reciting poems or folk-tales at evening campfires and celebrations. Although the language of the Koran was not widely spoken in Central Asia, the cameleers uttered their prayers in Arabic.

## **To Australia, with camels**

*By the late 1850s it was clear that camels would provide the only efficient means of exploring inland Australia and transporting goods across it. Horse and bullock teams could not cope with the sandy deserts, extreme heat and lack of water.*

Several attempts were made to introduce camels. In 1860, organisers of the Burke and Wills expedition brought 24 camels and their handlers from Peshawar and Karachi. Five years later, South Australian pastoralists Thomas Elder and Samuel Stuckey imported 124 camels and 31 cameleers on a three-year contract.

As well as carting goods, during the early 1870s these pioneers played a vital role in exploration and helped to construct the Overland Telegraph Line. More projects were to follow.

European cameleers were not unknown, but the Muslim cameleers were recognised as the best and most efficient. For them the camel was more than a beast of burden; it figures in the Koran as a 'blessed animal'. The cameleers knew each of their camels by name.

As many as 2,000 cameleers and 15,000 camels arrived in Australia during the period from 1870 to 1900. The 1893 gold discoveries at Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie greatly increased demand. A vast network of camel routes spread across the inland.

Most cameleers arrived as young men, in their twenties or thirties. Many left wives and families at home, returning to them at the end of their contracts. Others stayed on in Australia, and some formed unions with European or Aboriginal women. Today their descendants retain strong links with this distinctive heritage.

## **With the explorers**

*Despite its tragic outcome, the Burke and Wills expedition demonstrated that camels provided the mobility and endurance required for inland exploration. Most successful expeditions of the late 19th century were equipped with camels, controlled by 'Afghan' cameleers.*

Exploration parties depended heavily on the cameleers. They cared for the camels, loaded and unloaded equipment and provisions, located water, hunted game, and took part in the trials and achievements of exploration.

In the era of heroic exploration, the Muslim cameleers were rarely given adequate credit for their achievements. Expedition diaries confirm that several cameleers deserve the status of explorers.

Scientific exploration expeditions also depended upon the cameleers. While expedition scientists pursued their collecting and field observations, the cameleers ensured safe passage for the party and its scientific specimens.

## **Working with camels**

*From 1866 small groups of cameleers began arriving at Port Augusta, on fixed three-year contracts. Initially, they carted loads of wool from Thomas Elder's remote sheep stations to the port, returning with stores and fencing materials.*

By 1870 the cameleers had proved their worth. They joined exploration parties, and were given a key role in supplying the Overland Telegraph construction teams. Several became independent enough to establish their own carrying businesses.

Brothers Faiz and Tagh Mahomet began importing camels and cameleers, and pioneered new transport routes in the Western Australian goldfields. Abdul Wahid employed dozens of cameleers throughout inland New South Wales. Several European businessmen formed partnerships with the Muslim cameleers, and small fortunes were made.

The cameleers possessed remarkable stamina, walking with their camels from sunrise to dusk. They coordinated as many as 70 camels in a team, and secured heavy loads – up to 600kg in weight – with a single length of rope. Few Europeans could match their efficiency.

Not all north Indian and Afghan men arriving in Australia were cameleers. Some became hawkers or traders, buying goods from city merchants and selling direct to country residents. In the Broken Hill and Tennant Creek regions, several cameleers became miners, particularly as camel transport declined. A small number also operated as herbalists, drawing upon ancient tribal remedies of their homelands.

## **The cameleers and Aboriginal people**

*Muslim cameleers travelled through Aboriginal country on their inland routes, encountering a diversity of language groups. An exchange of skills, knowledge and goods soon developed.*

Some cameleers helped to convey traditional exchange goods, including red ochre or the narcotic plant pituri, along ancient Aboriginal trade routes such as the Birdsville Track. The cameleers also brought new commodities such as sugar, tea, tobacco, clothing and metal tools to remote Aboriginal groups.

Exchanges occurred at every level. Aboriginal people incorporated camel hair into their traditional string artefacts, and provided information on desert waters and plant resources. Some cameleers employed Aboriginal men and women to assist them on their long desert treks. This resulted in some enduring partnerships, and several marriages.

Aboriginal people learnt camel-handling skills and acquired their own animals, extending their mobility and independence in a rapidly changing frontier society.

## Life in camel camps and townships

*The first settlements were simple 'camel camps', sheltering the cameleers as they came and went. Gradually the cameleers added elements from their own homelands: mosques and religious teachers, halal butchers, vegetable gardens and date groves.*

These vibrant settlements grew up at the edge of towns like Broken Hill, Marree, Oodnadatta, Coolgardie and Bourke, next to open spaces where the camels could graze.

Known locally as 'Afghan camps' or 'camel camps', the settlements allowed the Muslim cameleers to live and work according to their own religious and social conventions. Relations with their European neighbours were usually marked by tolerance, although some conflict arose over issues such as water use or grazing rights.

One feature marked the lives of Muslim cameleers in Australia. Whether single or married, the cameleers arrived alone, without their womenfolk.

If the cameleers did marry in Australia, their wives were European or Aboriginal. These families brought up their children in the Islamic faith, but with the passing of the elderly cameleers during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the younger generation merged more fully with Australian mainstream society.

## Pioneers or aliens

*Entering the Australian outback as a tiny Muslim minority, the cameleers and their distinctive customs were initially accepted by Europeans. But as outsiders in colonial Australia, they also encountered adversity and discrimination.*

Tensions developed over access to water and competition with bullock-drivers. New laws and custom duties were applied at border crossings between colonies. As Australian nationalism strengthened during the 1890s, 'anti-Afghan' movements emerged. Asian immigration became an issue in colonial elections. Regulation of camel grazing and of unlicensed halal butchers increased the strain.

After Federation in 1901, negative sentiment towards 'coloured races' was expressed in the White Australia Policy. Under the Immigration Restriction Act (1901), cameleers entering Australia required exemption from a dictation test. Sympathetic Europeans provided references.

These factors, and the alignment of Ottoman Turkey against Britain during the First World War, help to explain the extraordinary events at Broken Hill on New Year's Day, 1915.

On that morning, two cameleers flying the Turkish flag fired on a picnic train as it left the town. At the close of the resultant gun battle, six people, including the two assailants, lay dead.

## Representation and memory

*Australia's Muslim cameleers are well remembered by their descendants, but have been largely forgotten or misrepresented in the historical record. Their pioneering roles are often overlooked, in favour of picturesque, oriental images.*

On their arrival in Melbourne during 1860 the first Muslim cameleers captured the imagination of notable artists. Their romantic depictions were tinged by 19th century 'orientalism'. Later, less flattering newspaper images depicted the cameleers as untrustworthy and cunning.

Ironically, the bureaucratic requirement to photograph and document cameleers returning to Australia after 1901 resulted in some of the most personal images of these men, enabling us to see them as individuals.

During the early 20th century the turbaned cameleers remained popular figures. City visitors were photographed with camels and cameleers. The 1957 film, *Back of Beyond*, gave Australian audiences their first insight into the way Islam was practised in the outback.

Inevitably, memories of the cameleers have faded. In recent decades events such as the 'Camel Cup' races have evoked the 'Afghans' as colourful, but marginal figures. Today, despite the efforts of historians, too little is known of the cameleers' place in Australia's heritage and their key role in our past.



Camel train approaching Alice Springs telegraph station, 1890s

Image: F. J. Gillen

Source: South Australian Museum

Image gallery: <http://museumvictoria.com.au/australias-muslim-cameleers>