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Revolution and Reflection

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REVULSION AND REFLECTION: THE COLOURED AND WHITE MUSLIM IN AUSTRALIA'S PRINT MEDIA FROM THE LATE NINETEENTH TO THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Katy Nebhan*

Abstract: Since the 1980s, much has been made about the lives of Australia's first Muslim settlers, the 'Afghan cameleers', their pioneering achievements and the suffering they endured through Australia's discriminatory policies and immigration laws. However, little, if any, academic attention has been given to the converts to Islam during this same period, many of whom were striving to rid the Australian public of misconceptions surrounding their new faith to end this discrimination and ignorance.

This article briefly looks at the way Australia's news media presented and perceived Australian Muslims from the arrival of the first cameleer settlers in the 1860s to the first few decades of the twentieth century when 'White' converts were increasing and unwittingly propelling Islam onto the public stage. While protectionist policies, particularly leading up to Federation, saw numerous unfavourable images of 'coloured' Muslims in the Australian print media, there was a subtle but significant change at the turn of the twentieth century. While the White Australia Policy stood in the face of Australia's Asiatic Muslims, it was largely irrelevant to the growing number of European and Australian converts who sought to subvert it in order to lift the Australian Muslim community of which they were part.

Keywords: *Islam, Muslims, converts, interfaith, Australian media*

THE GREATEST MOHAMMEDAN POWER? AN INTRODUCTION

By one of the extraordinary freaks of history, England is the greatest Mohammedan Power in the world. We, who in the middle ages sent our Knights to the Crusades in that terrific combat of fanaticism which watered the world with blood, are now the protectors of the faith of Islam, which has its followers in the heart of London.¹

These words introduced a brief article published in the West Australian *Northam Advertiser* on 8 June 1912. They echoed sentiments made over three decades earlier, in the *South Australian Register*, that attributed the "wholesale conversion to Mohammedanism" in the East to the extension of British influence and the "absolute freedom" enjoyed by its

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¹ "The Greatest Mohammedan Power," *The Northam Advertiser*, June 8, 1912, 8.

subjects.² The Australian print media used this example to critique and voice the concerns and suspicions of local unionists, missionaries and politicians, who were intent on maintaining the purity of the old British stock through active discrimination against the Indigenous population and ‘coloured’ immigrants, including Muslims. As custodians of the Anglo-Saxon race, they harboured the belief that, as long as racial purity was maintained and “only the noblest racial strain was permitted to flourish in Australian soil,” then the future of this distant outpost of the British race was secure.³ As a distinct Australian national identity developed towards the end of the 19th century, and as more ‘Asiatic’ immigrants and labourers made their way to the colony, discriminatory discourses evolved into protectionist policies. This article is interested in the nuances and approaches taken by the Australian print media towards those who did, and those who did not, fit the criteria for this discrimination and exclusion: the Muslim cameleers and ‘White’ converts to Islam. It will focus on the years between 1860 and 1940, when protectionist policies were most vigorous, and reflect on the significant role played by converts in demystifying Islam and supporting Australian Muslim activities.

LOCAL PAPERS AND AUSTRALIA’S EARLY MUSLIM PIONEERS

Distance has played a critical role in shaping Australian history and society. Distance between places within the vast country, to the rest of the world, and between Australia and the mother country have created a unique context, which has had an inevitable effect on perceptions and formulations of identity, security and national preservation. From the very beginning, the Australian print media sought to articulate, shape and at times, challenge these perceptions and constructs. First published in 1831, Australia’s oldest, perhaps most important, newspaper, the *Sydney Herald* upheld conservative views on politics, society and economics. As such, it appealed to the literate, upper class of the growing colony.⁴ Other publications sought to diversify their target audience to reflect on domestic news like farming and court cases as well as developments overseas. Religion also featured in numerous publications and sermons preached in the major churches on Sunday were often included in the papers on Monday. The unusual and the mundane were well-documented across the various Australian news media publications.

Yet, when the first Muslims who were recruited to handle the camels in what became known as the Burke and Wills expedition arrived in 1860, they barely received a mention. The three men were Belooch Khan, Botan and their headman Dost Mahomet, who came from the Peshwar district of Afghanistan. These men, who had done some service in the British army as sepoy, were casually dismissed in the account of the ‘Departure of the Exploring Expedition’ published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 27 August 1860.⁵ Following a

² “Mohammedan Fanatics,” *South Australian Register*, March 4, 1880, 4.

³ Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 71.

⁴ Victor Isaacs and Rod Kirkpatrick, *Two Hundred Years of Sydney Newspapers: A Short History* (Sydney: Rural Press, 2003), 5.

⁵ “Departure of the Exploring Expedition,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 27, 1860, 5.

lengthy description of the preparations and the various locals and dignitaries in attendance, the article stated:

The officers and men forming the expedition numbered fifteen, exclusive of three sepoys, whose duty it is to attend to the camels. The men are fine healthy-looking fellows and seem to enter with all their soul into the adventure. The camels accompanying the expedition number twenty-six, the horses twenty-two.⁶

These Muslims were British subjects and, for the governing class in the colonies, the presence of small diasporic communities from the British Empire would not have been unusual in the 19th century. References to the Muslim ‘Indians,’ ‘Afghans’ or ‘sepoys’ who took part in various expeditions in the late 19th century were common and relatively neutral. This changed, however, with the emergence of *The Bulletin Magazine* in the 1880s and other weekly publications that “spoke to both the city and the bush with a distinctive Australian voice.”⁷ There were a number of reasons for this change that saw references to the cameleers as ‘handlers,’ ‘Afghans’ and ‘sepoys’ shift to derogatory terms like “Mohammedan Fanatics” and “the filthy scum of Asia.”⁸ While there were underlying economic factors, perhaps the most critical development in the late 19th century was the growing national consciousness, particularly in outback Australia.⁹

NATIONALISM, RACISM AND REVULSION: MUSLIMS MAKE HEADLINES

The development of a distinctive Australian identity towards the end of the 19th century sought to embed pure British roots within the idea of a ‘national type’.¹⁰ Many newspapers perpetuated the ideal of a largely exclusive male domain where, as Clive Moore suggests, “dominant colonial Anglo-Celtic manhood and masculinity was constructed against the image of the multiple ‘other’: women; recent immigrant males; non-Caucasian males.”¹¹ This was combined with discussions of the other pressing issues of the day, including the threat of cheap foreign labour, abolition of private land ownership and new protectionist policies. While Australia’s economy was booming in the 1870s and 1880s, a severe drought lasting four years from 1890 crippled the economy. The frustrations from the resulting unemployment, poverty and industrial strikes played out in contemporary newspaper coverage that sought to curtail the ‘unfair’ competition.¹²

The camel industry had grown by the late 19th century and rural communities felt threatened. Although the working conditions of the cameleers were appalling, the growing ‘Afghan’ owned camel teams were seen to be in direct competition with the bullock drivers

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cited in Warren Fahey, “The History of the Bulletin,” *Warren Fahey’s Australian Folklore Unit*, accessed December 8, 2018, <http://www.warrenfahey.com.au/the-history-of-the-bulletin/>.

⁸ “The Case of Solomon Khan,” *The Worker*, July 28, 1900, 3.

⁹ White, *Inventing Australia*, 83.

¹⁰ Ibid, 63-84.

¹¹ Clive Moore, “Colonial Manhood and Masculinities,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 56 (1998): 43.

¹² Verity Burgmann, “Refashioning Australian Racism,” *Arena Magazine* 30 (1997).

and horse teamsters who were ‘White’. In December 1894, Frederick Vosper, the editor of the *Coolgardie Miner* and an ardent trade unionist, began a media campaign against the Afghans to have them deported from mining regions. Vosper was a prominent Queensland radical in the early 1890s and used his position as editor to further alienate the cameleers, who he claimed “weren’t wanted here or anywhere near the goldfields, which should be kept for the benefit of the white races.”¹³ Referring to what he perceived to be a cordial relationship between Britain and its ‘coloured’ subjects, he urged his readers to “let them conserve their friendship. We don’t want any of it, but what we want is for Australia to be free from such a complication.”¹⁴

The cameleers’ religious practices were directly targeted and this is evident in the coverage of the 1894 incident at ‘Afghan Rocks,’ where the ritual of ablution led to the murder of Noore Mahomet by a digger and the “outbreak of racial war.”¹⁵ Thomas Brandon Knowles faced a “charge of double murder” for shooting Mahomet and for the death of Jehan Mahomet, who was hit by a stray bullet.¹⁶ The trial was documented in the local papers and closely followed by the Anti-Afghan League, which was formed by Vosper in December 1894. One article referred to a “telegram received during a meeting of the Anti-Afghan League” stating Knowles had been acquitted and described the “great cheering” that followed.¹⁷ Two critical points were raised during the meetings of the Anti-Afghan and Anti-Asiatic Leagues, both of which operated along the same discriminatory premise, and were documented in the local papers. The first was the appeal to grassroots action and the advice given to attendees “not to put their trust in Prince or Premier who were notoriously great in promise, but small in performance” was used to garner greater ‘individual effort’ “to give effect to public opinion.”¹⁸ The second point, and what appears to have been the driving force behind this popular movement, which could attract up to 2000 attendees, was the importance of grappling with “the sneaking, crawling, insidious Mahomedan invasion now going on.”¹⁹

RACE, RELIGION AND TRANSNATIONAL INFLUENCES

The desire to curb the ‘influx of Asiatics,’ other than the Chinese, was by no means new and neither was class-consciousness. The targeted attacks on ‘Mohammedans’ in the Australian newspapers was. This was certainly not lost on members of the predominantly Muslim cameleer community and other Muslim immigrants. Mohamed Hasan Musa Khan, a well-educated clerk and nephew of an older cameleer, addressed this when he wrote to the editor of the *Daily News*:

¹³ Frederick Vosper, “The Afghan Question,” *Coolgardie Miner*, December 25, 1894, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: A History of Afghan Camel Drivers in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989), 176.

¹⁶ “West Australia. Double Charge of Murder, Native Outrages,” *The Advertiser*, December 17, 1894, 5.

¹⁷ “The Anti-Asiatic Movement,” *Coolgardie Miner*, January 26, 1895, 6.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

From the addresses delivered by Mr Vosper and other members at the last meeting of the so-called Anti-Asiatic League, it is evident that the object of the league is to prevent the influx into W.A. of Chinese, Hindoos and *Mohammedans* in particular. It is the *religious* prejudice and *not the colour* prejudice that has prompted certain individuals to organise an association under the name of the so-called Anti-Asiatic League.²⁰

Musa Khan was outspoken and did not shy away from writing to the newspapers on behalf of his countrymen to “protest against such seditious agitations” as those expressed by Vosper.²¹ Many of his statements, including “Australian jealousy and prejudice against the Asiatics is well known,” would have been seen as uncharacteristically aggressive, rather than defensive or indicative of a frustrating reality.²² The early Muslim settlers often demonstrated “both physical and psychological strength,” but in some instances, the provocation proved to be more than they could bear and Musa Khan sought to voice their frustrations.²³ For Vosper, a man like Knowles was a great representative of the “whole white race in Western Australia” because the ‘uppity’ Afghans needed to be put back in their place.²⁴ Any attempt to stand up for their rights further aggravated the unionists and ‘White men’ complained that these early Muslim settlers “were now becoming aggressive and were wanting miners’ rights.”²⁵

There is no one simplistic discourse that articulates the representation of Muslims in Australian newspapers during this period. The shift from references to them as workers and handlers, even oddities, to rivals and a ‘Mohammedan’ threat was not entirely born within an Australian context. What John Esposito described as a “powerful wave of Muslim religious revivalism” in the 18th century, inspired by a perceived external challenge and threat of conquest by Europe, was partially responsible for this change.²⁶ Despite a clear shift of power in the 19th century and the dominance of European colonialism, Christian religious figures in particular were weary and warned of complacency. In 1883, the South Australian *Christian Colonist* published an article titled “Islam and Christianity,” which described the work of the missionaries and the “civilisation advances” in Mount Lebanon and Damascus. Despite their elevated social status and economic success, the author reminded Christians in the region and Australia that it is “not possible that the Mohammedans can rest contented with the present state of matters,” and given the opportunity, they will “attempt to regain their former power.”²⁷ This ‘threat’ was given as the reason why “Christians are to some extent always uneasy, and when any excitement arises among the Moslems the alarm and fear of the Christians may be easily imagined.”²⁸

²⁰ Hassan Musa Khan, “The Anti-Asiatic League,” *Daily News*, April 24, 1895, 3.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “An Asiatic on Coolgardie,” *The West Australian*, July 16, 1895, 6.

²³ Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns*, 108-109.

²⁴ Cited in Andrew Markus, *Fear & Hatred: Purifying Australia & California 1850-1901* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979), 196.

²⁵ “Afghans at Coolgardie” *The Argus*, December 24, 1894.

²⁶ John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47.

²⁷ “Islam and Christianity,” *Christian Colonist*, July 6, 1883, 5.

²⁸ Ibid.

The alarm and suspicion referred to by a number of Australian mainstream publications focused mainly on the “active subtle Mahomedan missionaries” who through the “ignorant convert to Islam” sought to give the “Crescent the upper hand throughout the world” and subvert Christian rule.²⁹ When *The West Australian* included a note about the visit of “an interesting Eastern gentleman” Mulla Mirza Khan from Bombay, it listed the number of people he had converted to Islam within 12 months. These converts, according to the article, numbered “no fewer than 109 persons of whom, it may interest some of our readers to learn, 30 are Europeans and Englishmen.”³⁰ The writer also referred to the newspapers he had seen with Khan from Liverpool, New York, Cairo and other cities, “all printed and published in English at the places named solely for proselytising purposes.”³¹ The purpose of Khan’s visit to Western Australia was, according to the article, to prove to the local people that Islam is not a faith “befitting only a barbarous and unenlightened people, but the most cultured and highly civilised as well.” As well as helping to establish a mosque in Perth, Khan was interested in “founding a free Mohammedan library.”³²

It is no coincidence that Khan’s visit to Australia occurred at around the same time agitation towards Muslims in Australian print media was increasing. Towards the end of the 19th century, the elite of Indian diasporic communities were advocating the mobilisation of an international Muslim brotherhood. This transnational movement, which played out implicitly in Australian newspapers through the letters written by Musa Khan to various editors, may have been the reason for Mulla Mirza Khan’s visit.³³ It may have also been the key motivator behind Musa Khan’s public expressions of frustration in these letters. According to Eric Germain’s study of southern hemisphere diasporic communities, members of this literate Muslim elite were:

In search of recognition of their religious specificity but also of their “Britishness,” a colonial citizenship meaning equal rights and opportunities with white settlers in the Crown’s colonies. Among the external signs of this Anglophilia – truly felt but, at the same time, consciously used as a political claim - was the English language that the Indian elite chose to use in their political expression.³⁴

For Australia’s early Muslims, this link with Britain offered some hope amid the discrimination and racism that played out in the local media.

²⁹ “A Pan-Islam Propagandist,” *Western Mail*, April 7, 1899, 9.

³⁰ “News and Notes,” *The West Australian*, December 24, 1895, 5.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Eric Germain, “Southern Hemisphere Diasporic Communities in the Building of an International Muslim Public Opinion at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 1 (2007), 128.

³⁴ Ibid, 126.

BETWEEN THE LINES: THE LIVERPOOL MUSLIM INSTITUTE IN BRITAIN

In his study, Germain highlights the critical relationship between the diasporic communities from the British Empire, in South Africa and Australia, and the growing international influence of the Liverpool Muslim Institute in Britain. Prior to the official establishment of the institute, the Australian print media was conscious and somewhat cautious of this link. In “Our City Letter” published in the *Victorian Express* in 1879, reference was made to the “heads of a Mahomedan Mission” who sought:

to make converts to Allah and the Prophet among Christian communities. Such a mission, lately established in London has it is said, added many names to the roll of the faithful, among whom the fair sex appear in considerable force. What if we should have Mosque and Minaret in Perth. Who can tell? Let us wait.³⁵

This link, as Germain argues and as evidence in Australian print media clearly suggests, was direct and somewhat empowering for the struggling early Muslim settlers who were shunned as ‘coloured aliens’.³⁶ A number of the letters written by Musa Khan to the Australian papers referred to earlier, coincided with his election as an honorary vice president during the annual meeting of the Liverpool Muslim Institute held in 1895.³⁷ His active communication with Australian newspapers also coincided with the plans that were being made to build a mosque in Perth and the visit by Mulla Mirza Khan. Musa Khan, a bookseller in Perth, would become the founder, treasurer and secretary of the Perth Mosque and the representative of the ‘camel men’ at royal functions. The pamphlet style book, *History of Islamism in Australia from 1863-1932*, which he compiled, points to a man who was eloquent and heavily involved in community affairs.³⁸ He was also the initial distributor of the weekly journal *The Crescent* and the monthly magazine *The Islamic World*, both of which were produced by the Liverpool Muslim Institute. Although there is no way of knowing how many and how often they were sent to the colony, these magazines appear to have been the first Islamic publications in the English language for Muslims in Australia.

The Liverpool Muslim Institute in Britain played a significant role in reorienting the image of Islam and Muslims in Australia’s print media. The institute and British Muslim Association were founded by a local Liverpool solicitor, William Henry Quilliam (1856-1932), who converted to Islam following a visit to Morocco in 1887 and adopted the name Abdullah. In 1894, he received an invitation to visit Constantinople from the Sultan who appointed him ‘Sheikh al-Islam of Britain,’ a formal title that was also recognised by the Amir of Afghanistan. While the title, which has never been held by anyone since, provided

³⁵ “Our City Letter Perth,” *Victorian Press*, January 15, 1879, 3.

³⁶ Philip Jones and Anna Kenny, *Australia’s Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s-1930s* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2007), 135.

³⁷ Germain, “Southern Hemisphere Diasporic Communities,” 127.

³⁸ Mohamed Hasan Musakhan, *History of Islamism in Australia from 1863-1932* (Adelaide: Mahomet Allum, 1932).

Quilliam with the legitimacy to claim leadership “of all Muslims in Britain and to represent their interests,” he was just as “devoted to the interests of Islam throughout the globe.”³⁹

Quilliam was particularly attentive to the diasporic communities from the British Empire and he actively assisted his “translocal agents,” as Germain refers to them.⁴⁰ As well as responding to letters Quilliam provided these translocal agents with literature that challenged popular stereotypes that Islam was ‘fanatical,’ ‘backward’ or ‘opposed to Christian values.’⁴¹ During the 1896 annual meeting of the Liverpool Muslim Institute, reference was made to the

large contingent of Afghan Muslims in Western Australia, with a very earnest brother, H. Musa Khan, among them. They seem to be making a good impression among the European settlers there, and their very presence has brought the question of Islam prominently before the minds of the inhabitants of the island continent.⁴²

Germain uses this speech, along with an article reference to the Liverpool Muslim Institute published in the spiritualistic Melbourne journal *This World and the Next* then reproduced in Quilliam’s 1896 issue of *Islamic World*, to illustrate the influence of the Institute “among the new religions’ networks.”⁴³ While these publications may have given literate Muslim settlers like Musa Khan a sense of place within a broader international Islamic brotherhood, they had little bearing on local politics or perceptions of these ‘coloured’ Muslims as unwelcome outsiders, particularly among the working class. Religion as well as race continued to be unnecessarily highlighted, even in documented civil cases, and used as an identifier and opportunity to place Islam against Christianity. In the case of a Fitzroy youth, Sydney Morris, who was charged with stealing shawls and other goods from a Muslim hawker, Terio Khan, part of the page one headline read “Mahommedan V. Christian.”⁴⁴

Musa Khan’s persistent writing of letters referencing the proselytising successes of the institute elicited scathing public responses. One letter from Vosper stated Islam had a “tendency to raise the fetish worshipper and override the Christian.”⁴⁵ Musa Khan’s position within Quilliam’s international Islamic brotherhood and his being a ‘British subject’ carried little weight in Australia, mainly because of his colour. He expressed his frustration in a letter he wrote to the *Western Mail* in 1898, which stated that under the provisions of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, he could not be a prohibited immigrant as he was “well educated in English” and “not a pauper, idiot, diseased person or criminal.”⁴⁶ His rationale attracted no adequate response or interest, and Australia moved towards Federation, racism and discrimination towards Australia’s early Muslims would be legislated.

³⁹ Ron Geaves, *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2016), 75-76.

⁴⁰ Germain, “Southern Hemisphere Diasporic Communities,” 127.

⁴¹ Geaves, *Islam in Victorian Britain*, 68.

⁴² Germain, “Southern Hemisphere Diasporic Communities,” 128.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “An Extensive Robbery. A Hawker’s Outfit Stolen. Mahommedan V. Christian,” *The Herald*, April 25, 1895, 1.

⁴⁵ Frederick Vosper, “Correspondence: The Anti-Asiatic Question,” *The West Australian*, May 3, 1895, 3.

⁴⁶ Hassan Musa Khan, “Indian Immigration,” *Western Mail*, May 13, 1898, 53.

PROTECTIONISM AND PURPOSE

If the British government, for the sake of political stability prompted by “Indian frontier troubles,” publicly chose not to aid nor hinder religious enterprises for fear of accusations of racism, Australia had other concerns.⁴⁷ During the Colonial Conference in London in 1887 and in the presence of 121 representatives of the British Government and her colonies, including legislatures from the six disunited Australian colonies, Alfred Deakin spoke out against the Colonial Office. The criticism from this self-professed “strong protectionist” from Melbourne surprised many of the delegates.⁴⁸ However, Deakin echoed a view that was prevalent in the national newspapers: that Australia was different to other colonies in the Empire because it was surrounded by ‘coloured’ nations and needed to legislate to protect itself.⁴⁹ The early ‘Asiatic’ Muslim settlers had no place in the ‘one nation’ Deakin sought nor were they of the ‘one stock’ that would enjoy this ‘one inheritance.’⁵⁰

From 1901, as the new protectionist program manifested through Deakin’s defence and support of the White Australia Policy, there was a subtle yet historically significant shift in the way Australian written media engaged with Islam and Muslims. Deakin saw ‘unity of race’ as an “absolute essential to the unity of Australia.”⁵¹ While Australia’s ‘Asiatic’ Muslim settlers struggled with legislated discriminatory policies, the number of converts to Islam was increasing. In the numerous articles included in the local papers, some presented this as a challenge, while others were intrigued by stories of their own kind embracing Islam.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for perceiving the spread of Islam as a challenge was due to the mid-century crises of faith that had “weakened the intellectual authority of the church.”⁵² The Pan-Islamic movement, of which Quilliam was a part, gave Muslims a renewed purpose despite colonial rule. One article stated Muslims were not only increasing in number, but ‘in zeal’ despite the “young men studying at Christian Colleges and Universities.”⁵³ Racial inclusion and equality were often at the centre of discussions around the appeal of Islam. Referring to the “Pan-Islamic movement of which so much has been heard of late,” one article stated a “potent influence in conversions to Islam is that the convert is thereby raised at once to the social state of the converter,” and in countries where the caste system prevails, Islam is “an almost irresistible temptation.”⁵⁴ While the threat of a takeover is included in this article, with the writer pointing out that “far from remote, too, is the risk of a general rising of Mussulmans wherever they are to be found,” comparisons with Christianity feature far more prominently:

Hence is where Moslemism has an advantage over Christianity. By becoming a convert to Christianity the coloured man gains nothing socially. The white-faced Christian will

⁴⁷ “Indian Frontier Troubles,” *Coolgardie Pioneer*, January 8, 1898, 13.

⁴⁸ “A Chat with the Hon. Alfred Deakin,” *The South Australian Advertiser*, January 31, 1887, 5.

⁴⁹ Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns*, 147.

⁵⁰ Alfred Deakin, “Alfred Deakin, N.L.A, Victoria, 1899,” *The West Australian*, July 30, 1900, 9.

⁵¹ Judith Brett, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2017), 264-267.

⁵² *Ibid*, 145.

⁵³ “The Vitality of Islam,” *Argyle Liberal and District Recorder*, May 29, 1906, 4.

⁵⁴ “The Revolt of Islam,” *Advertiser*, October 31, 1911, 8.

continue to regard him as degraded, their nominal brotherhood ceasing when they part company on leaving a church, if indeed, the coloured man is not excluded altogether.⁵⁵

Articles published in Australian Christian papers certainly supported this perception of coloured people. Some were particularly aggressive in their presentation of the missionary affairs conducted in the colonies, and seeking to inspire action in order to avert “humiliation of defeat at the hand of the Mohammedan religion,” they used crusader-like comparisons:

Difficult as the problem of the conversion of primitive or previously savage races has proved, it is said to be nothing in comparison with that which presents itself in the hand-to-hand struggle that must ensue in consequence of the close grips into which Christianity and Mohammedanism have come on the latter’s own ground ... It is a religion – if such it may be called at all – of fanaticism and bitter hatred of all outside its own pale; a religion which in the past has not scrupled to gain its converts at the point of the sword.⁵⁶

The idea that this Islamic devotion should act as a stimulant to Christian enterprise was certainly followed up by some who entertained the idea of ending “Islam’s advance” in Africa and Asia. In what was described as a “remarkable movement” sweeping over Australia as a result of the advance that Islam was making in Africa, “many business men of Hobart have caught the same spirit of enthusiasm.”⁵⁷ They could not fathom the idea of the whole continent being overrun by Muslims and sought to fundraise in order to send their own missionaries abroad.

The Deakinite protectionism, which supposedly curbed this ‘threat’ from reaching Australia and historicised a narrative of modernity and ‘pure’ nationalism, was perhaps unable to quell the apprehension of those who feared an impending Islamic resurgence. While the majority of the world’s Muslims lived under British dominance, the prestige and supposed power this afforded the Empire depended “upon the protection of their faith and of the countries who hold the faith.”⁵⁸ News of the early Australian Muslim pioneers, many of whom lost their livelihood with the advent of the motor vehicle and discriminatory policies, was eclipsed by stories of the external threat of Islam that was “advancing with rapid strides” on the “Dark Continent.”⁵⁹ Despite the numerous articles that purported “Islam may mark the world wide dominance of the creed of the Prophet and the death of Christianity”⁶⁰ and the “Mohammedan faith” was increasing “by leaps and bounds,” there was a feeling among some that this was not being taken seriously by the majority of the population.⁶¹ In a review of the book *The New World of Islam*, one article pointed out, despite the Orient “now under Christian control,” the Muslim population “speaking out, and the eastern birthrate filling the world with our enemies,” this book by Lothrop Stoddard, which the author presumed “would awaken the world” to the “rising tide of colour,” did not because he concludes, “who heads?

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Islam or Christ,” *Methodist*, January 27, 1912, 7.

⁵⁷ “Islam’s Advance in Africa,” *World’s News*, June 25, 1921, 11.

⁵⁸ “The Greatest Mohammedan Power,” 8.

⁵⁹ “Islam’s Advance in Africa,” 11.

⁶⁰ “The New Islam,” *Mullewa Mail*, November 12, 1925, 8.

⁶¹ “Islam Menace,” *Advocate*, November 23, 1938, 13.

Who cares?"⁶² Less than a month later, a second, more detailed review of the same book was published. The fear of the Chinese 'coolies' and the Eurocentric stereotypes that had haunted the Australian psyche for decades were evoked with heightened urgency as they were coupled with Islam:⁶³

Just think of it, Moslems in China! I had never heard of them, and I take the liberty of assuming that what I've never heard tell of is unknown to the man in the street ... No other religion has such a grip on its votaries. Islam has won vast territories from Christianity, and Brahmanism, and has driven Magiasm from the face of the earth.⁶⁴

The 'enormous' progress of 'Mohammedanism,' particularly in Africa, did not alter perceptions or approaches to race over time despite it being presented as one of the main reasons why "Islam is strong." In an article that offered a brief history of the religion, the author stated Islam "definitely offers to the Black a superior social position, which we Whites, as a race, neither dare nor intend to give to them."⁶⁵ While the perceived 'threat' of Islam saw little change to public perceptions of race, the articles that appeared were absorbed into a broader public discourse inspired by growing community of White converts to Islam.

REFLECTION, CURIOSITY AND THE 'WHITE' CONVERTS TO ISLAM

The fear-mongering accounts about the threat of Islam were perhaps driven by other articles that were appearing in mainstream Australian newspapers at the same time, pieces that were written with reflection and a sense of curiosity. A significant number of these were published as announcements of 'White' converts to Islam in Australia and abroad. The difference in the approach and language employed by the writers stands in stark contrast to the pieces concerning 'coloured,' 'Black' or Asiatic converts. For instance, the announcement of Isabella Dunn's conversion to 'Mohammedanism' highlighted her status as a "highly educated" young English lady who was the daughter of "an English engineer" formerly employed in Turkey.⁶⁶ Although the piece stated her conversion "created a painful impression in European circles at Constantinople," it was respectful when referring to Islamic law that did "not require a Christian woman in marrying a Turk to abjure her faith."⁶⁷

Numerous conversions were reported with similar objectivity and respect. A short piece in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1907 noted the "well-known Egyptologist and excavator" Dr Ewald Falls, who "became so convinced of the virtues of Mohammedanism that he confessed the faith" and took on the name Musa Mohamed.⁶⁸ A rather interesting case is that of English chorus girl Edith Mabel Thatcher, who converted to Islam and married Prince Nasir Ali Khan, who was the son of one of India's most powerful native rulers. Prince Nasir, who had

⁶² "I've Been Reading," *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, August 22, 1922, 2.

⁶³ Jan Ryan, "Chinese Australian History," in *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*, eds. Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997).

⁶⁴ "The New World of Islam," *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, September 15, 1922, 3.

⁶⁵ C. C. Martindale, "Islam," *Advocate*, September 20, 1934, 25.

⁶⁶ "Lady Convert to Islam," *The Pilbarra Goldfield News*, July 3, 1902, 4.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Convert to Islam," *Daily Telegraph*, October 26, 1907, 7.

been living in England for 14 years and was a “naturalised Englishmen,” was regarded as somewhat acceptable because, although he was “a tall, dark, athletic man,” he looked “more like a European than an Asiatic.”⁶⁹ Edith was by no means the first White woman to convert and marry an ‘Asiatic’. The same article points out “many lovers have risen superior to the barrier of colour and of race” and rather than critiquing the union, it was romanticised.⁷⁰ Throughout the early years of the 20th century, conversions became more commonplace as papers continued to report “the most recent English converts to the Islamic faith.”⁷¹

While there was a sense of resignation in the reporting of converts to Islam in England and the other colonies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Australian cases were closer to home and were presented with a little more fanfare. Like the British media who remained relatively respectful of English converts, often made up of Victorian gentlemen, property owners, political elites or Britain’s gentry, the Australian media generally followed suit. Some of the local converts, like T. M. Mitchell from Melbourne, were inspired and influenced by the Liverpool Muslim Institute and had access to Quilliam’s publications.⁷² There was nothing like the Liverpool Muslim Institute in Australia. In his correspondence with them, Mitchell described the Victorian Muslim community as “Indians, and very few of them can speak good English’ and while there were some meetings between them and Australian converts, ‘nothing particularly satisfactory has been done.’⁷³ Unlike the British Muslim community, which had a substantial educated class, Australia’s early Muslim settlers were largely illiterate and often led a nomadic lifestyle due to their work. This did not stop converts like Mitchell from seeking to improve the image of Islam, and in doing so, create public awareness that would ease the burden of ignorance for the Australian Muslim community as a whole.⁷⁴

The international diffusion of the Liverpool institute’s proselytising, as well as exposure to eastern Islamic countries through the world wars, saw an increase in Australian converts to Islam and their prominence in Australia’s media. Unlike the ‘coloured’ Muslims who were discriminated against for their faith and colour, White converts were afforded an elevated status. Interestingly, a number of them came from religiously conservative backgrounds as was the case with the ‘Blue-Eyed Sheikh’ John Alexander Grafton, who was “reared in the Presbyterian faith” but “embraced Mohammedanism.”⁷⁵ Sheikh Abdullah, as he became known, appears to have been interviewed in his home, which is described as being “simply furnished” with a “vase of Christmas bush” on his “Mohammedan dining table.” His wife was a “staunch Christian” and, at 14, he went to the Royal Observatory for training “to be a minister of the Presbyterian Church.”⁷⁶

⁶⁹ “Chorus Girl Marries a Prince,” *West Australian*, January 13, 1910, 4.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ “Converts to Islam,” *Northern Star*, July 21, 1916, 6.

⁷² Germain, “Southern Hemisphere Diasporic Communities,” 128.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ “Blue-Eyed Sheikh: Mohammedan Leader in Sydney,” *News*, January 1, 1931, 6.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

The documentation of Grafton's story through a series of articles published in Australian papers is significant for several reasons. Following the publication of the 1 January interview, a brief piece appeared stating "the imminent announcement of this well-known divine's conversion will cause a sensation in the Church" and local Muslims were keeping this "prospective conversion a closely guarded secret."⁷⁷ It went on to state "members of the newly-established Islamic Society in Sydney" had a "big place" for him in their community and he would occupy a "front-rank position."⁷⁸ In the earlier publication he confirms he was made "leader of the Mohammedans of New South Wales," and there were "3,000 or 4,000 of them, and they chose me as Sheikh, which means leader or teacher."⁷⁹ What is particularly interesting is, in the interview, he makes it quite clear that, when he came to Australia in 1901, he was already "a firm Mohammedan."

There is no doubt that British or European Muslims would not have faced the same immigration, work or social restrictions as their Asiatic counterparts, simply because they were 'White'. Although Grafton was once a man of the Church, he came from an ordinary family. Conversion to Islam did not improve his economic status and, while he was made a leader of the local Muslim community, his newfound position and the associated publicity, afforded him little material gain. One article assured the reading public that "he will not starve" and praised his "keen brain," adding that he was not the sort of chap "gone wrong" but a "well-read, well-balanced man, with extensive knowledge, and a lot of common sense."⁸⁰ Grafton used the publicity and engaged Australian audience to clarify popular misconceptions about Islam, including polygamy and blasphemy, and share the aspirations of his growing community. He made no attempt to hide the fact he was "training" converts including "two ex-Presbyterians" as well as a Roman Catholic whom he "took from the Communist camp."⁸¹ As a more acceptable member of the emerging Australian nation, Grafton was also in a better position to play the role of go-between, which gave him access to press media.⁸² Other literate Australian Muslims like Musa Khan also had access to the press; however, they were more often than not ridiculed and shut down, based solely on their colour and race.

That is not to suggest that converts were completely immune to Australia's protectionist program. Grafton's public statements were cleverly worded, with subtle innuendos to occasional institutionalised discrimination. One of the greatest challenges facing his community was social engagement, as they had no adequate meeting place. Grafton spoke of building a large mosque in Sydney that would not be primarily a place of worship, but "a sort of social club," and perhaps knowing this was not easily achievable, he added "the sky is our

⁷⁷ "Going Over to Islam," *The Northern Miner*, January 31, 1931, 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ "Blue-Eyed Sheikh," 6.

⁸⁰ "Sincere, He Knows He Will Not Starve," *Evening News*, January 7, 1931, 5.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Germain, "Southern Hemisphere Diasporic Communities," 128.

mosque to pray under.”⁸³ Grafton continued to work towards meeting this essential need; however, the possibility ended with his death in 1935.

The existence of what can be referred to as “closet European Muslims” was also raised by Grafton who claims:

Among the European Mahommedans in Sydney are many well-educated men in the Civil Service. One of our most prominent men is a high official in the Education Department. He dare not reveal his religion, for there would be an outcry at a Mahommedan teaching young Australians.⁸⁴

This idea was certainly supported by numerous other articles published about Australian Muslim converts. Australian diggers feature most prominently in these pieces, which often reveal the conversion following the death of the soldier. One such example was that of Aly Azireldin, who died in Cairo in 1939. Azireldin was formerly Australian Peter Austen, who enlisted for the Great War and “served on Gallipoli and in Egypt with the Australian Army Medical Corps.”⁸⁵ Austen, who was a journalist, returned to Australia following the war, but decided to go back to Egypt in 1920 where he worked selling carpets and curios before starting a private school in 1924. His death in Egypt revealed the digger’s conversion to the press and, unwittingly, his story.⁸⁶ The respectful and objective reflection was republished, with little variation, in at least five different Queensland newspapers.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The place of Australian Muslims and Islam in Australia’s print media has evolved within a specific Australian context, as well as a peripheral one partially influenced by British colonial affiliations. The arrival of the first cameleer settlers in the 1860s saw them occupy a rather ambiguous place in the local papers, eclipsed by the explorers they were hired to assist and secondary to the camels they handled. As drought and economic hardship hit Australia’s outback communities towards the end of the 19th century, the contentious place of the increasingly successful cameleers dominated the local papers. Unionists and miners were among those who drew on growing nationalist sentiments to highlight the need to stop coloured immigration, lobbying for policies that sought to exclude the very Muslim pioneers who had helped open Australia’s harsh interior.

As the influence of protectionist policies heightened, particularly after Federation, stories of White converts to Islam were already appearing in Australian newspapers. Partly inspired by the Liverpool Muslim Institute and the pan-Islamic movement, the curiosity surrounding the conversion of ‘White’ people opened the world of everyday Islam to the Australian public. While it may not have been enough to make significant changes to the lives of

⁸³ “Blue-Eyed Sheikh,” 6.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ “To Islam from Brisbane,” *Sun*, June 14, 1939, 8.

⁸⁶ “Digger Converted to Islam,” *Dalby Herald*, July 21, 1939, 3.

Australia's early Muslim pioneers, it saw a change in the presentation and perceptions of Australian Muslims and Islam.

This article is only the starting point for discussions surrounding the role of converts to Islam during this period, and the importance of their efforts in clarifying misconceptions and mobilising local Muslims to end discrimination and ignorance.

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