

# Tin Mosques & Ghantowns

A History of  
AFGHAN CAMELDRIVERS  
IN AUSTRALIA

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## TIN MOSQUES AND GHANTOWNS

kindred in the mosque ante-room. Women were barred from burials at the graveyard and only joined the men afterwards for the burial feast, which the women had prepared. They were excluded from the incessant gambling and from the men clustered around the narghile, gossiping, boasting and arguing, or sitting and squatting around the big outside fire watching the musicians and the occasional dancer perform in the firelight. As noted (Surah IV:34), obedience was a religious requirement of women and lack of compliance on the women's parts could result in harsh penalties. Also, traditionally it was accepted that an Afghan husband had full and exclusive rights over his wife.<sup>45</sup> It was his right to demand obedience and his right to discipline his wife to secure this obedience. An Afghan's masculinity and virility, of such importance to him, could be measured and admired by his peers, or so it was considered, in proportion to the degree of obedience and subservience in his household. This 'masculinity' and 'virility' had a certain aspect of sexual appetite and competence which often further tended to frighten some Aborigine and European women, regardless of its somewhat repressive psychological effect. Ghantown wives consequently rarely disputed with their husbands.

Sometimes the European wives of Afghans were forbidden to use certain Western medicines or medical procedures for, according to the Afghans, it was prohibited by Muhammedan law. Back in their native lands, with a general lack of modern medical knowledge, the mortality rate, particularly among women and children, was high, confidence in modern medicine was low and traditional herbal remedies were preferred to modern drugs or surgery. Fearing an irate husband, some Ghantown wives would resort to visiting a doctor in secret if they or their children were ill, and to hiding their medicines.<sup>46</sup> Agnes Khan, the wife of the Marree mullah, Assim Khan, like many of the other women, frequently hid medicines in the house, particularly during the Spanish influenza epidemic which claimed one of her children, and almost her own life. She was eventually taken to the Port Augusta hospital by the townspeople of Marree while her husband was away hawking.<sup>47</sup>

Mohamet Allum, the ex-cameleer and later Adelaide herbalist of some fame, refused to allow his young wife smallpox inoculations before the family visited Afghanistan. His wife contracted smallpox and died there.

Among the Afghan men, disputes and revenge murders nearly always occurred over honour, money, loading and women. In the milieu of the ethnic mix of outback Australia in the late 1800s and early 1900s the struggle to claim ethnic superiority would sometimes result in violence and murder. Afghans generally were regarded as being towards the bottom end of the order, with most other nationalities considering themselves superior.

### *The Case of Annie Dost: A Puchtunwali Murder*

Dost Mohammed, given the title 'Ameer' (or Prince), was born in India in about 1870 and came to Australia at the age of twenty-one to work with camels. His father, from Baluchistan, was a very wealthy man. He owned important government buildings in Karachi, and several restaurants. The Dost family lived in splendour in a huge house (described as a 'castle') set in large grounds with many servants, some 20 miles from Karachi in the village of New Khumbarwara (now a suburb of Karachi).

The stocky and strong Dost had an adventurous spirit, for although he had wealth, comfort and status in his native land, he chose to board one of the ships loaded with camels bound for Australia. Perhaps he already knew Faiz Mahomet, who had several times travelled between Australia and Karachi, and his tales of



the excitement of the Coolgardie gold-fields enticed Dost. From his arrival on the gold-fields until his death, Dost Mohammed worked closely with Faiz.

The young Dost Mohammed developed a camel carrying business at Coolgardie, and became a champion wrestler on the gold-fields. In 1894 the twenty-three-year-old quick-tempered yet popular Afghan met Annie Charlotte Graubner, the seventeen-year-old daughter of German immigrants who had recently started a small business at Coolgardie. Annie, the youngest of her family, wanted to marry Dost but her family recoiled in horror at her marrying a 'coloured Afghan'. One night the couple eloped, and on camelback they headed for the northern gold-fields, chased by Annie's brothers when they found their sister missing next day. The brothers soon gave up the long chase and the pair were married.

Soon afterwards Dost sent for his camels and his men and established a carrying business in the north. He bought a sheep station outside Port Hedland where the couple settled and his camels could be depastured. Near the homestead was the cameleers' camp.

Dost and Annie made several trips to India and Dost's family home, their first son Mustapha being born there in 1896. The couple had another five children over the years, and were reconciled with Annie's family who moved northwards to Port Hedland, by now eager to take advantage of their son-in-law's wealth and generosity. He bought a hotel in the port for the family to manage, and employed Annie's two brothers, Bill and Harry, as cameleers with his strings.

The two brothers saw themselves as superior to the Afghans, for not only was their sister married to the camel owner but they were German, not Afghan. It did not suit them to be treated the same way as the Afghans, and after they had returned to Port Hedland with loading and Dost Mohammad insisted, as he always did, that the drivers load the next consignment immediately on to the camels and head back out to suitable feed, the brothers refused to leave Dost's house. Dost Mohammed returned home after helping load the next consignment, expecting his German brothers-in-law to be heading out of town with the camels. Instead they were languishing about in his house. He spoke sharply to his wife about her brothers and a fight broke out with the Graubner brothers violently attacking Dost.

The powerful Dost had broken one of the brothers' arms as he tried forcibly to evict them during the fight in the kitchen, and the brothers crept back that night while the household was sleeping and beat Dost over the head with two heavy pieces of jarrah-wood. It was a totally premeditated murder, and Dost did not die immediately although his skull was crushed. The brothers pleaded manslaughter and managed to enlist their sister's support, claiming that the killing occurred accidentally during the kitchen brawl, and that the brothers had been under extreme provocation from Dost Mohammed. The Afghan community, however, learnt otherwise. Dost had gone to the camel camp after the kitchen fight and had told his men he sensed danger.

The brothers were tried in Broome two months later but were discharged, found not guilty on 26 June 1909. There was, so it was found, insufficient evidence as to who provoked the fight. Dost's Afghan countrymen were unable to read or write in English and were generally not sufficiently articulate in the language to defend their countryman, nor could they articulate a case for him. In the eyes of the European custodians of the law at that time, an Afghan was more foreign, less able to be trusted and understood, than two German men. Decisively the verdict swung towards the evidence given by Dost's German wife,

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Annie, and she, caught in an emotional and psychological dilemma, defended her brothers. The Graubners were released.

With Dost Mohammed now buried, his wife Annie, against advice from her family, left Australia with her children for Karachi. She claimed she wanted to collect her eldest son, Mustapha, who was then living at the Dost family 'castle', but she also wanted to claim the inheritance of her husband's share of the family estate (or at least what she hoped and naively understood it to be). Her brothers wanted her to carry a gun as protection, and the Australian authorities tried to dissuade her. However, the headstrong and intrepid woman refused protection and advice, and ensconced herself and her children at the family 'castle' near Karachi for eighteen months while she tried to legally battle for Dost's estate. She was, by all appearances, welcomed. Her children were dressed like royalty and given private tutors and bodyguards. Yet as the legal proceedings dragged she felt uneasy and thought that a conspiracy was gathering against her. Finally, tired of the pursuit and general unease, she made secret plans to leave for Australia. She told her children of these just before the departure dates, asking them to keep it a secret until departure time. But Mustapha, the eldest, told some trusted servants and the word leaked out. Two 'Australian Afghans' who had worked for Dost Mohammed, and who had returned to India, Lal Mahomet and Karda Bux, decided now was the time to strike.

Annie's watchdog was borrowed by a servant on some pretext and while she was asleep the 'Australian Afghans' crept into her bedroom and viciously stabbed her to death with a large Ghurka knife. Their motive was Puchtunwali. The 'Australian Afghans' knew that Annie knew the facts of her husband's murder and yet she had not implicated her brothers. Instead she had assisted and allowed them to go free. Under Puchtunwali she, therefore, must die to balance the scales of justice, to avenge the honour of her husband, his children and her husband's family.

Annie's murder was particularly bloody, her chest stabbed, her throat cut and her fingers cut off so the men could take the beautiful rings that Dost had given her. During the struggle Annie had bitten off part of one of the attacker's fingers, and the finger was still in her mouth when the Indian police investigated. One of her daughters had seen the murderers and recognized them as Port Hedland men who used to escort and guard the children in WA. With the noise of the struggle the children, including the youngest son, Ameer, rushed to their mother's room to find her dead and covered with blood. It was a nightmarish experience, one that coloured and tragically controlled Ameer's life thenceforth.<sup>48</sup>

The murderers were caught, easily identified as one had a finger missing, and Annie's young daughter had recognized them. They were tried and hanged in Karachi. The children were shipped back to Australia and placed in orphanages in Perth. Their only relatives, the Graubner family, refused to have anything to do with these foreign-looking children. On several occasions a man, Raham Shara, was sent from the Dost family in India to collect the children from the orphanages and take them back to the 'castle', but neither the wary authorities nor the terrified children would comply. The eldest son, Mustapha, had stayed in India when the others were shipped to Australia and Ameer always suspected him of conspiracy in the murder. At one time he too paid a visit to the Perth orphanages, attempting to persuade the other children to return, but with no success. Dost Mohammed's wealthy estate was passed to Mustapha and the links were severed with the Australian side of the family.<sup>49</sup>





*Annie Dost, murdered wife of the wealthy camel owner Dost Mohammed of Port Hedland.*  
COLLECTION OF AMEER DOST (SON OF DOST MOHAMMED)