

3 The Indian Ocean and the Making of Outback Australia An Ecocultural Odyssey

Haripriya Rangan and Christian Kull

National histories, by their very definition, tend to be parochial and territorial in scope. The fluidity of change wrought by diverse interactions and movements of plants, animals, and people across lands and oceans are restricted and solidified in narratives that seek to assert a territorial integrity based on a few biophysical factors and human actions within tightly defined national political boundaries. We would expect environmental and ecological histories to be different, to adopt more expansive perspectives to convey the fluidity and dynamism of interactions between social and biophysical nature in the making of landscapes without being constrained by national boundaries. Oddly enough, few do. It seems as though most environmental and ecological histories submit to the disciplining practices of nation-making narratives, tending to reproduce and reinforce the parochial visions and insular territorial imaginations of their nationalist counterparts.¹

This chapter travels across the Indian Ocean and beyond the bounded territorial imagination of nation-making narratives to tell a different kind of ecocultural history about the making of Outback Australia. It centres on the enigma behind the widespread presence of *Acacia farnesiana* in the Outback landscape of Australia. About 1,000 of the 1,350 or so known species of acacia are considered native to Australia, but *A. farnesiana* is not one of them. According to biologists, this many-branched and shrubby thorn tree has its origins in Central America and the Caribbean, and is now widespread across various parts of southern Europe, southern and eastern Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. It has more than forty vernacular names in different countries: cassie, huisache, sweet acacia, needle bush, and Ellington's Curse are some examples.² Its botanical name derives from the fact that it was first brought to Europe in 1611 from the West Indies and cultivated in the gardens of Cardinal Odoardo Farnese.³

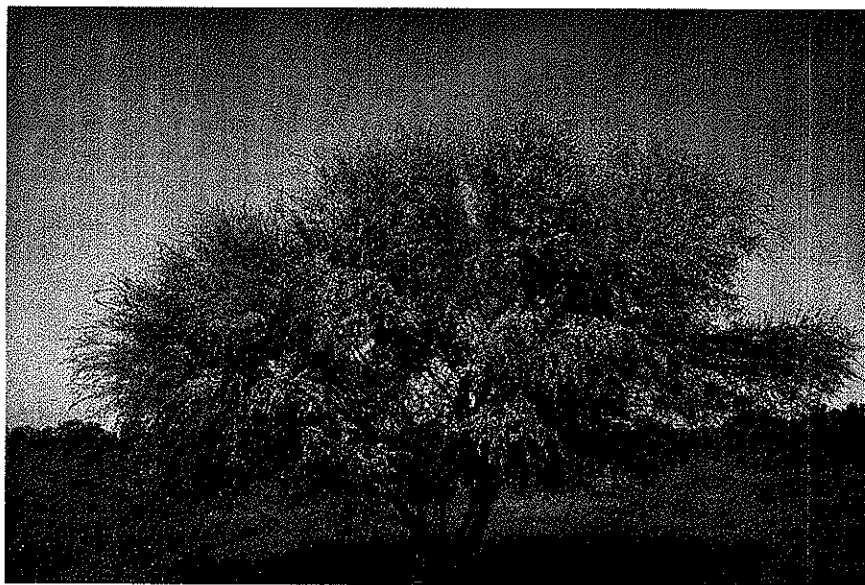


Figure 3.1 *Acacia farnesiana* in its home range in Texas. Courtesy of Campbell and Lynn Loughmiller, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Acacia farnesiana is found across much of the Australian Outback, and is commonly known as the mimosa bush. Its presence in Australia is regarded as an enigma because the plant arrived here well before Captain James Cook did in 1770. Australian botanists generally use 1788 as the decisive date for classifying plants as “native” or “introduced” to the island continent.⁴ The idea that this plant arrived in Australia without the agency of British settlers is seen as remarkable in itself; that it made its way into the interior of the continent before British explorers appears even more mystifying when seen through the lens of popular Australian history. As far as mainstream national narratives are concerned, the island continent had no “real” history to speak of before 1788, the year that the First Fleet landed on the eastern coast near Sydney carrying its cargo of convicts to establish the first British settlement in the colony of New South Wales. As the historian, Paul Carter observes:

Almost the greatest barrier to Australia’s spatial history is the date 1788. On the one side, anterior to and beyond the limits of Australian ‘history’, lies a hazy geo-historical tradition of surmise, a blank sea scored at intervals down the centuries by the prows of dug-outs, outriggers, and latterly, three-masters; it is a ‘thick horizon’, a rewarding site of myth and speculation. But it lacks substance; cause and effect do not converge in its events, but spread out behind like the wake. After 1788, all is solid. Even the weather seems arrested. In alighting at Botany Bay, Phillip steps out of Myth into History. His first concern is not like Cook, to water his ships but to protect them permanently

from offshore gales. He removes almost immediately to Sydney Cove: his means of passage become marks of place. Cook is cast off. A substantial history is inaugurated, an imperial tradition of names, years, floggings, heads of cattle, salaries. The sea, formerly an asylum, itself becomes a prison, a turbulent, unavoidable barrier to progress.⁵

The great historical barrier of 1788 plays a central role in the way the Outback is configured in Australian consciousness and formation of national identity. If, as Carter says, from this moment onwards the ocean was transformed from asylum to a barrier representing “the tyranny of distance”⁶ from the metropolitan centres of imperial Britain, it was also the moment when the inland of the island continent emerged as an unknown void and foil to the ambitions of progress in this outpost of Empire. Girt by sea⁷ and held back by a vast inland wilderness, Australian consciousness and history has clung to the southern and eastern coastlines, the liminal spaces of refuge that, since 1788, have embodied the “restive fringe”⁸ of British settlement. For most Australians, the imagined geography of the continent centres on coastal cities and their agricultural hinterlands followed by the Bush, which not only marks the edge of civilisation but also stands as a repository of settler yearnings for European pastoral idylls and environmental sensibilities.⁹ Beyond the Bush lies the Outback, appearing in the Australian imagination as a harsh and unyielding expanse of wilderness that resists the reach of historical progress.



Figure 3.2 *Acacia farnesiana* in northwest Queensland. Rangan 2006.

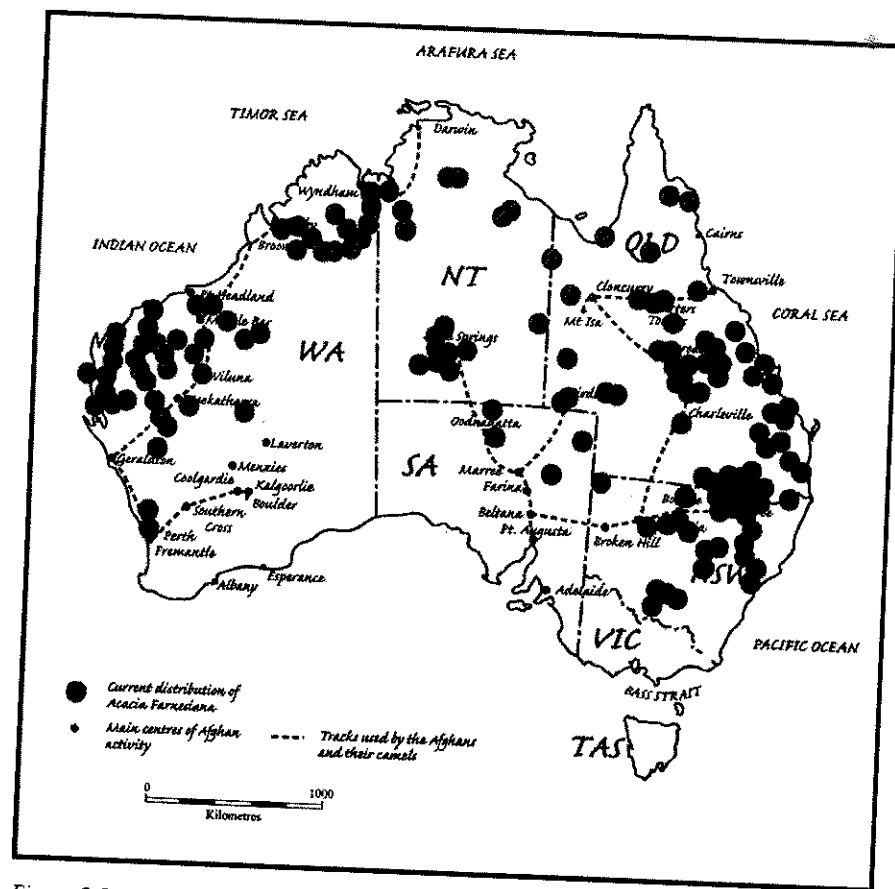


Figure 3.3 Distribution of *Acacia farnesiana*. Based on *Flora of Australia* online, 2007.

The widespread presence of *Acacia farnesiana* in the Outback is an enigma because it problematises both the historical barrier of 1788 and associated geographic imaginings of Australia. Having arrived from elsewhere before 1788, it escapes botanical classification as either native or introduced. Its presence in the interior of the continent challenges mainstream geographical imaginings of Outback Australia as a remote and inhospitable terrain isolated from the rest of the world. The real enigma of *Acacia farnesiana* is that it offers the opportunity to rethink the geographical history of the Australian Outback in other ways—not as the desolate heart of an island continent at the antipodean edge of European civilisation, but as a landscape connected and changed by its interaction and engagement with surrounding oceans and worlds. The plant compels us to look beyond prevailing insular and parochial barriers and cartographic visualisations and seek new ways of understanding the history of the making of Outback Australia.

CARTOGRAPHIC OPENINGS

Most people, while looking at maps, see them as authoritative representations of territories, political boundaries, and locations of places, resources, and physical features. Some may look closer to examine the details of measurement, the artwork, the aesthetics, or the power brought into representation. But very few people, other than geographers,¹⁰ are likely to look at maps and see them as processes by which worlds are drawn into being.

The process of drawing Australia into a world of interaction antedates the arrival of Captain Cook at Botany Bay in 1770 and subsequent British settlement of the southeastern coast. It is said that Indian Ocean traders may have landed on the northern shores of the continent during the fifteenth century. Arab traders carrying rice and spices across the Indian Ocean from Banda and neighbouring islands during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries may have encountered the northern and northwestern coast of Australia; some of them are said to have described a large uninhabited country to the south of Borneo where they saw large, flightless birds. It is known that Makassan proas or fishing boats regularly visited the northern shores to collect and trade *trepang* or sea cucumbers with the indigenous groups of these regions. The narratives of these sightings, encounters, and exchanges may not have been recorded or charted on paper, but were drawn on rocks¹¹ and into symbols, techniques, and cultural practices.¹²

Australia's geography was brought into cartographic existence through a series of maps drawn by Portuguese navigators crossing the Indian Ocean. Following Vasco da Gama's arrival in the southwest coast of India in 1497 and capture of the spice trade between India and western Indian Ocean cities, the Portuguese established their base in Goa and pressed on to gain control of the trade in the eastern Indian Ocean. By 1511, Alfonso de Albuquerque, the Governor of Goa, had captured Malacca (Melaka), the port where Malay, Chinese, Arab, and Indian traders operated; in 1512, his deputies António de Abreu and Francisco Serrão arrived in the Moluccas (Maluku); in 1516, the Portuguese established a colony in Timor, the island closest to mainland Australia.

Between 1516 and 1606, the year when the Dutch navigator Willem Jansz sighted the north coast of the continent, Australia began appearing in cartographic form in Portuguese maps. It first shows its tentative presence in broken lines in the southeast corner of the *Carta Anonima Portuguesa* drawn in 1533; the southern coast of Java is open and uncharted and the eastern coastlines of Borneo and Celebes (Sulawesi) are also drawn in broken lines. The Dauphin chart, which is dated 1536 and part of a collection called the Dieppe maps, draws Australia in an unfamiliar but prominent form, identifying it as Iave La Grande or Greater Java. The drawing visualises the western coast of the continent as adjacent to Java and separated by a Rio Grande. What is currently represented as the southern coast of Australia is truncated, with the southwestern parts appearing as the western

A. farnesiana may have arrived on the Australian continent by a number of ways: it could have travelled across the Indian Ocean on Portuguese or Dutch merchant ships to Timor and Java, or across the Pacific on the ships of Spanish explorers travelling from the Americas to the Philippines. George Birdwood, an Anglo-Indian official and botanical enthusiast, made the following observations about the plant:

It is described as a native Chilean plant by Molina, in the 16th century, from which date it is gradually traced through a succession of writers eastward, in Italy, the Morea and Greek Islands, in the gardens of Egypt and Arabia, and in Western India. From Buenos Ayres, it was carried by Europeans into Louisiana, and as far north as Charleston, and again by Europeans it was carried from America westward to Tahiti and the Philippines, to Timor and Java, and apparently to Burmah and the Coromandel coast of India. It has now overspread all India. Everywhere its name seems to be derived from its exquisite "aroma," and as the Greek writers do not refer to this, its overwhelming characteristic, I accepted it as a plant of exclusively American origin, and one of the most delightful gifts of the old world to the new [*sic*]. It is first botanically described in *Hyacinthus Ambrosium* in AD1605–72.¹⁵

The seedpods of *A. farnesiana* may have floated across from Timor or Flores and taken root along the northern coast of Australia,¹⁶ or the seeds may have been exchanged by Malay and Makassan fishermen with the indigenous groups of the region.¹⁷ Whatever its mode of travel across the oceans, *A. farnesiana* had not only arrived well before Captain Cook, but also established its presence in the interior of the continent. In 1845, when Sir Thomas Livingstone Mitchell, then Surveyor General of New South Wales, journeyed northwards on one of the early exploratory expeditions to find an inland route from Sydney to the Gulf of Carpentaria, he recorded the presence of *A. farnesiana* near the Belyando River (roughly 300 km inland from the coastal town of Mackay in present day Queensland), and added a sample to his plant collection.¹⁸ It is possible that coastal indigenous groups in the north may have played a role in its inland diffusion; they may have valued *A. farnesiana* seeds for their protein and exchanged them with inland indigenous groups that, in turn, may have planted the seeds along river courses and sites of settlement in their territories.

The current distribution of *A. farnesiana* in Australia is not limited to northern coastal areas or particular sites near northern rivers, but is spread wide across the interior of the continent. How did this come about? To answer this question, we first need to describe the plant's characteristics and its modes of propagation. *A. farnesiana* is a woody, deciduous, and thorny shrub that can grow between 1.5 to 4 metres in height. It ranges across warm temperate dry through tropical desert to moist forest zones between sea level and 1,000 metres elevation. It thrives in dry localities and

on loamy and sandy soils, often acting as a soil binder and a shade tree; in Australia, the plant grows in rangelands and farmlands in semiarid and arid areas and in the unoccupied inland deserts. It often grows as scattered plants, but may form spiny thickets near watercourses. It is also one of few plant species that can persist near highly saline artesian watering drains.¹⁹ Its flowers are small, round, orangeish yellow in colour, and very fragrant;

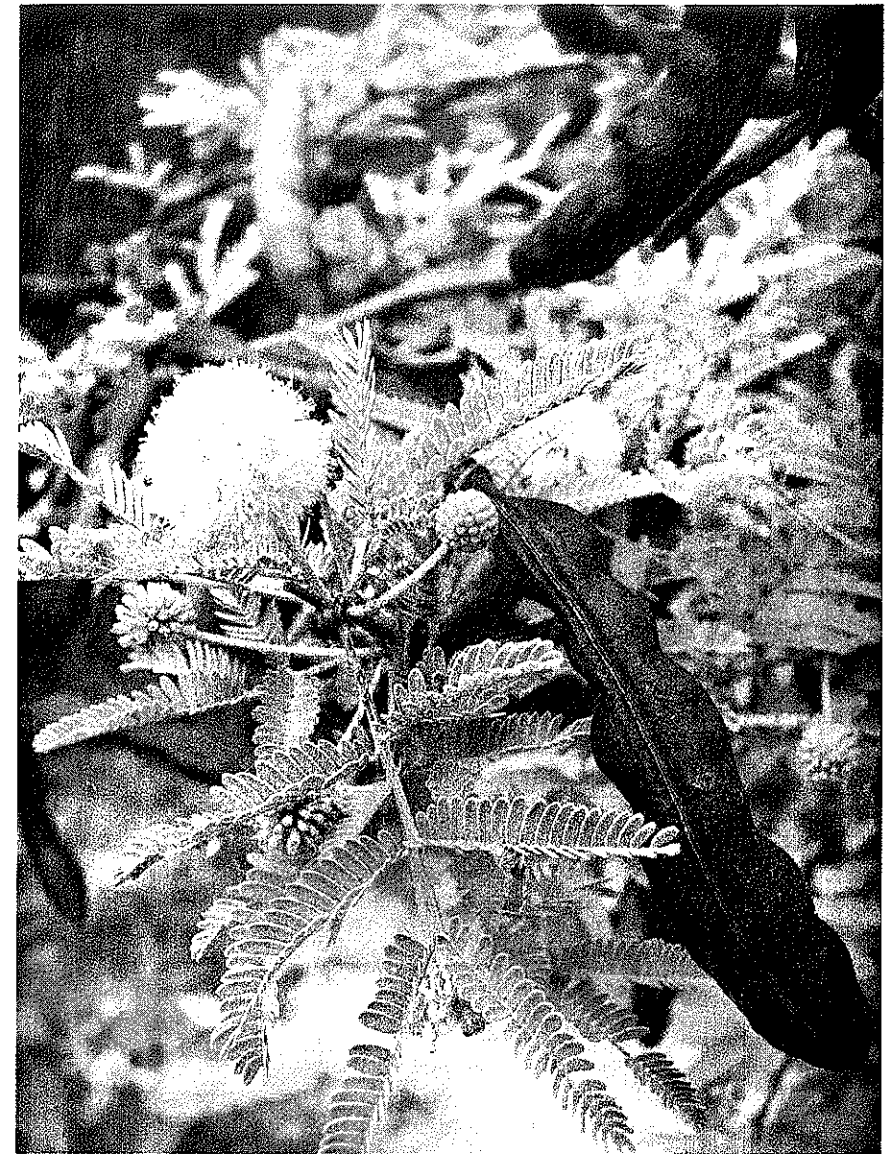


Figure 3.7 *Acacia farnesiana*: foliage, flowers, and pods. Courtesy of Forest & Kim Starr 2008.

it produces seedpods roughly 4 to 8 cm. long, and each pod can contain between twelve and fourteen seeds.

Once established, *A. farnesiana* seedlings can grow readily and resprout quickly after damage by fire or browsing; and although the aerial portions of the plant may be killed by fire, it can regenerate through basal shoots. The seeds have a protein content of around 18 percent, and are used as food in some parts of the world. The plant is used in traditional medicinal treatments for a range of illnesses; the bark and pods have high tannin content and are used in leather tanning and other ways. Most important, though, is that its foliage is an excellent source of forage for ungulates or hoofed animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats. The seedpods are nutritious and readily eaten by them, and the seeds are transported in their droppings; these animals are the main agents for assisting its dispersal across land.²⁰

Given these hoofed transporters of *A. farnesiana* seeds were not part of the continent's native fauna, how did they arrive in the remote reaches of inland Australia? The answer may seem fairly simple if we accept the arguments of the environmental historian, Alfred Crosby. He argues that the wheat- and livestock-based settler colonialism in the temperate zones of the Americas, southern Africa, and Australasia was, in effect, a "biological expansion of Europe" aided by the "portmanteau of biota" that accompanied European settlers to these regions. The animals, plants, insects, and organisms that settlers brought with them were the biological means by which these regions were transformed into "neo-Europes."²¹ Based on this perspective, the logical answer would be that as British settlers extended their livestock farming into inland areas, their cattle and sheep would have aided the dispersal of *A. farnesiana*. But this reasoning does not make much sense when placed within the historical context of settlement expansion in inland Australia. By the 1830s, squatters and colonists had grabbed or occupied much of the land near the southern coastal belts, and there was growing pressure to expand settlement further inland. Settlers clung to visions of "yeoman farms in little Englands,"²² but were faced with an inland terrain and environment that provided little succour for such aspirations. Much of the continent's inland was unexplored, and the few forays into the semiarid and desert areas beyond the bushland fringe offered no prospect of "making a nation of sheep-walks."²³ Exploring the interior and getting European settlers and their livestock to move into inland Australia required the agency of another kind of hoofed animal that was brought across the Indian Ocean from the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent rather than Europe. This was the camel.

MAKING THE OUTBACK

Many of the colonists arriving in Australia during the early decades of the nineteenth century had served the East India Company in various military capacities and campaigns in the Indian subcontinent.²⁴ Several of them

were familiar with the use of camels and knew their advantages over horses and bullock teams in traversing desert and arid terrains. Some presented proposals to their colonial governments for inland exploration using camels. The urgency for inland exploration was spurred by the commencement of a trade in horses between the colony of New South Wales and the East India Company for the purpose of remounting its cavalry and other administrative units in the subcontinent. The Torres Straits proved dangerous for navigation, and hence travel from Sydney to India involved lengthier journeys around the southern and western coasts of Australia. Sir Thomas Livingstone Mitchell's exploratory expedition to the interior was chiefly motivated by the desire to find an overland route from Sydney to the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria. In outlining the objectives of his expedition, Sir Mitchell wrote:

But other considerations, not less important to the colonists of New South Wales, made it very desirable that a way should be opened to the shores of the Indian Ocean. That sea was already connected with England by steam navigation, and to render it accessible to Sydney by land, was an object in itself worthy of an exploratory expedition. In short, the commencement of such a journey seemed the first step in the direct road home to England, for it was not to be doubted that on the discovery of a good overland route between Sydney and the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria, a line of steam communication would thereupon be introduced from that point to meet the English line at Singapore.²⁵

The proposal to import camels from India seemed feasible in principle; steamers carrying horses to Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay could return with cargoes of camels. In 1836, a government official of the colony of New South Wales presented the Governor a memo exploring the practicality of introducing camels from the upper reaches of the Ganges. He observed that while it was possible to obtain camels from northwest India for purposes of inland exploration, the foremost difficulty would be in procuring drivers and handlers to accompany the animals.²⁶

Overall, there were various pressures on colonial governments during the 1840s and 1850s to mount expeditions to the interior and claim new inland territories. The newer colonies of South Australia and Victoria were keen to compete against New South Wales for territory and overland trade routes to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The discovery of copper and lead deposits in areas north of Adelaide and the rising demand from English manufacturers for wool added to the urgency of exploration for minerals, pastoral expansion, and more direct inland routes that linked up to established steamship routes in the Indian Ocean archipelago.²⁷

In 1840, six camels were shipped from the Canary Islands to Port Adelaide in South Australia, but only one survived the journey. Two more camels arrived the same year in Melbourne, and were displayed as curiosities at the fairgrounds before being sent to Sydney, where they remained on display

in the Government House.²⁸ In 1846, the sole surviving camel shipped from the Canary Island to Adelaide was used in a minor exploratory expedition led by John Horrocks, a South Australian pastoralist. Horrocks was unaccustomed to handling the animal and was severely injured while riding it. He died from the injury and “Horrocks’ beast” was put to death.²⁹

The first successful importation of camels was achieved under the aegis of George Landells, an ex-British army officer from India. Landells travelled to Peshawar and into the tribal areas of Afghanistan in 1858 to buy camels and recruit drivers. He returned to Melbourne with twenty-four camels and three cameleers, well in time for the Victorian expedition to traverse the interior to the Gulf of Carpentaria. In 1860, the famously ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition set off from Melbourne with much fanfare to race against other colonial expeditions across the interior, but neither of the leaders had much understanding or experience of negotiating desert terrain. Burke quarrelled with Landells, the only European with some understanding of using camels in arid terrains; Landells abandoned the expedition and returned to Melbourne. Burke then left the Afghan cameleers behind at camps in Coopers Creek and Menindie, and departed with Wills and two assistants to win the race to the northern coast. Only one of the assistants, John King, survived the expedition.³⁰

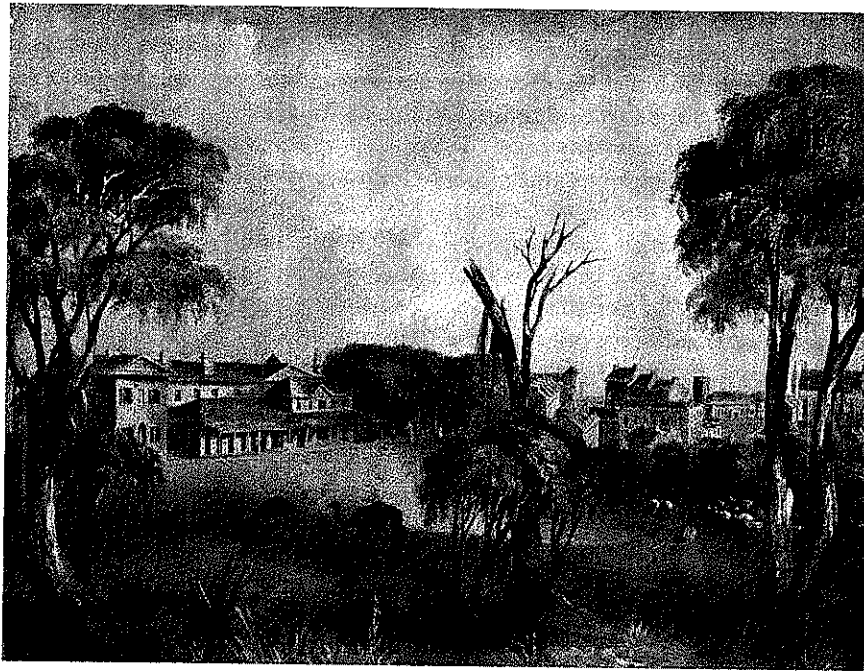


Figure 3.8 View of Government House, Sydney, NSW, as it appeared when vacated by Sir George Gipps in 1845, circa 1845. Painting by G.E. Peacock. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

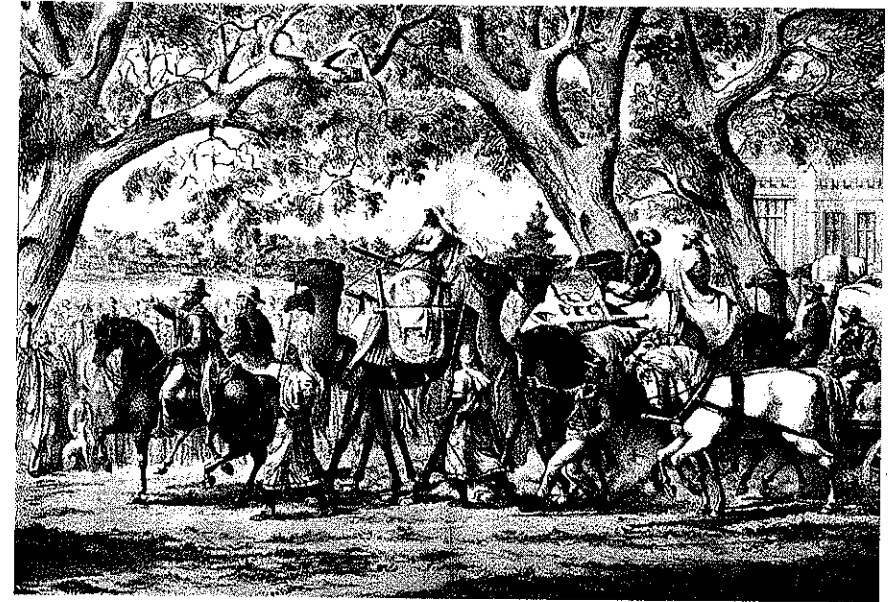


Figure 3.9 Departure of Burke and Wills from Melbourne; lithograph, circa 1860–circa 1880, Massina & Co. Courtesy of the State Library of Victoria.

From the 1860s onwards, camels were imported in larger numbers. Thomas Elder, a colonist with pastoral and mining interests, established a camel stud in Beltana, a small settlement north of Port Augusta, and recruited Afghan camel drivers to rear and train the animals. He financed five expeditions into the interior from South Australia and supplied them with camels and Afghan cameleers. The 1870s were the decade of great inland expeditions and desert crossings, and almost every major expedition relied on the camels and their Afghan handlers for transport. The 1880s were the years of consolidation, with graziers extending into the newly explored areas and obtaining leases for setting up vast sheep stations in the semiarid areas and desert fringes. Prospecting and mining expanded in the interior, and railways began to be built to service and connect these interior towns to the coastal cities. Afghan cameleers became commercial operators, camel breeders, and small-scale merchants, hauling wool from Outback sheep stations and bringing back supplies of flour and other necessities during the dry season. The 1890s brought another spurt in explorations using camels and Afghans to prospect for new mines and grazing land. They transported ore from mines, supplied water to mining settlements, and were used in surveying and constructing the Rabbit-Proof Fence, the Overland Telegraph Line, and the trans-Australian railway.³¹

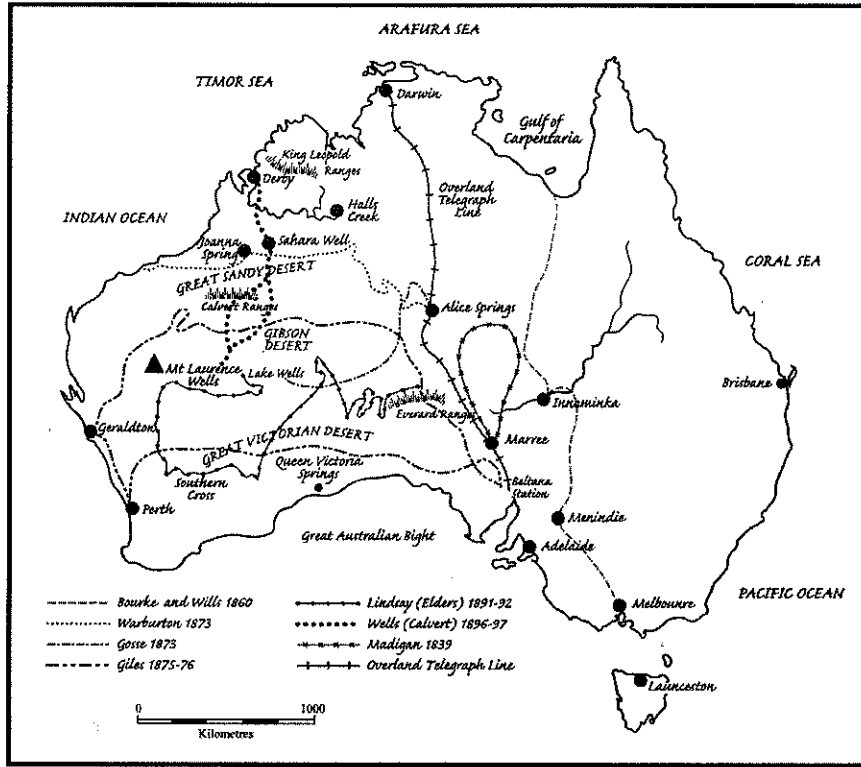


Figure 3.10 Desert explorations using camels and Afghan cameleers. Based on Stevens 1989, p. 43.

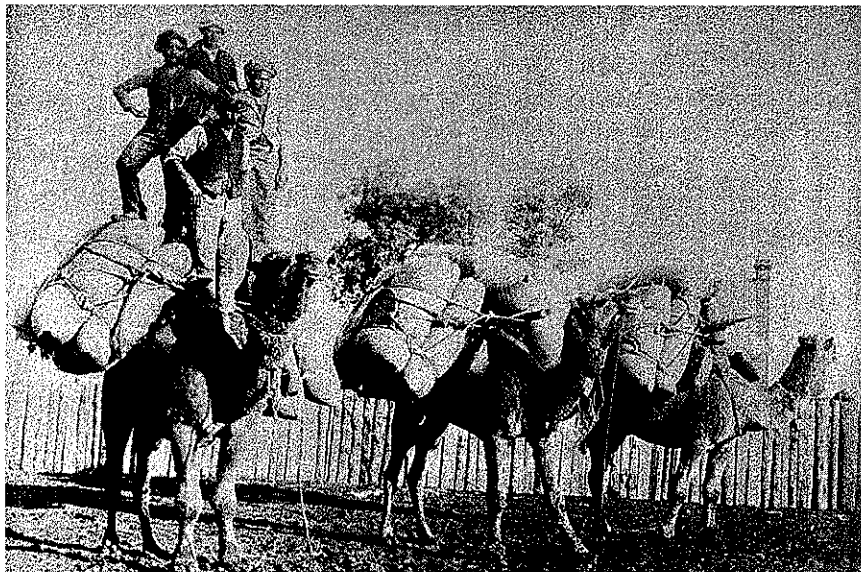


Figure 3.11 Camels carrying flour in a dry season, circa 1895. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.



Figure 3.12 The “Happy Thought” prospecting party, circa 1900. Courtesy of the Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia.

By the 1900s, the Australian Outback was conceived as the place where adventurous men of hardy Anglo-Celtic stock sought their fortunes and forged the prosperity of their colonies and empire. Yet, regardless of the bravado and rhetoric, the Outback could not have been produced or imagined in such terms without the work of camels and their handlers. In his memoirs of working as a camel haulage operator in the West Australian



Figure 3.13 Surveyor canning and party on the survey trip to mark out the line of the Rabbit-Proof Fence, Western Australia, circa 1901. E.J. Brady Collection, Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

Outback, Herbert Baker describes the importance and extent of the Afghan pack camel transport:

Camels were seen in all the parched outback towns from Coolgardie and Marble Bar to Cloncurry and Broken Hill. Where they did the most work would be difficult to say, but packing copper from the dry ranges to Cloncurry railway station or Burketown wharf kept a few thousand camels busy for years. Camels were indispensable in the vast region bordered by Broken Hill, Marree, Oodnadatta, Alice Springs and Birdsville, a region embracing part of New South Wales, South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. In this area, they were used for packing bore casing, six-, eight-, and ten-inch steel tubing in 12-ft. lengths . . . The camels' main work in the dry pastoral areas was carrying stores and fencing material to sheep stations and returning with their wool . . . camels were used extensively in sinking dams, being harnessed to pull ploughs and scoops. Perhaps the largest colony of camels was on the West Australian goldfields, where the dry plains were tailored for no other animal.³²

By the first two decades of the twentieth century, camels had become a ubiquitous feature in the everyday life and landscape of the Outback in

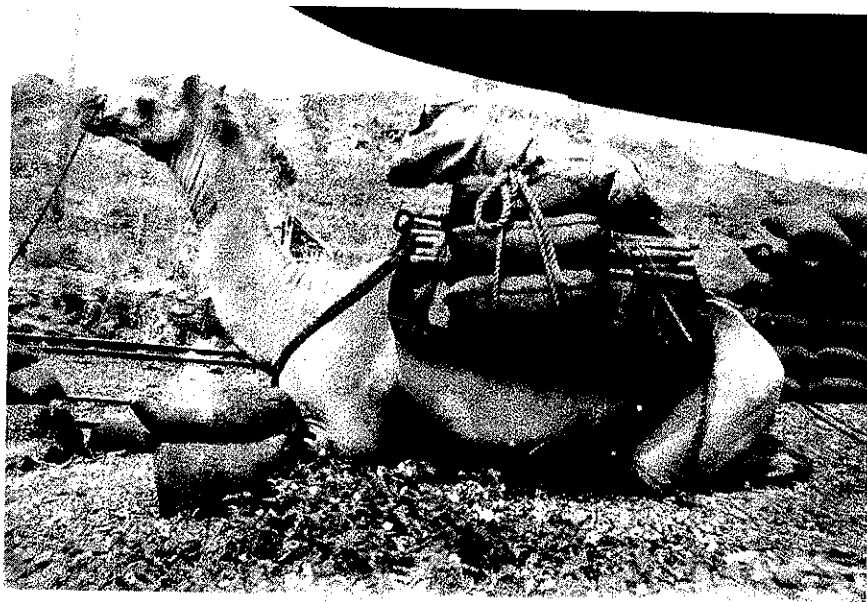


Figure 3.14 Camel with bags of ore from Mt. Isa copper mines, ready to go to Cloncurry, 1932. Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

Western Australia, Northern Territory, northwest Queensland, and the interior of New South Wales. Cameleers continued to import them from the northwest regions of the Indian subcontinent such as Baluchistan, Sind, and Rajasthan for maintaining and supplementing the breeding stock. The governments of South Australia and Western Australia set up camel stud stations for breeding and recruited Afghan cameleers to train young camels. It is estimated that there were over 20,000 camels used in trains or harnessed for transporting goods and construction works. Camels tracked across the Outback to deliver mail and supplies to stations, the inland police used them to patrol the Rabbit-Proof Fence, and many men and women belonging to indigenous communities took up camel droving.³³

REMAKING THE OUTBACK

For nearly sixty years following their arrival in Australia, camels and their Afghan handlers provided the most economic and reliable forms of transport for goods and services in the Outback. Pack camel trains operated across every mainland state except Victoria, covering nearly three-quarters of the continent. Between the late 1800s and the first decade of the twentieth century, they helped inland sheep farmers survive and keep

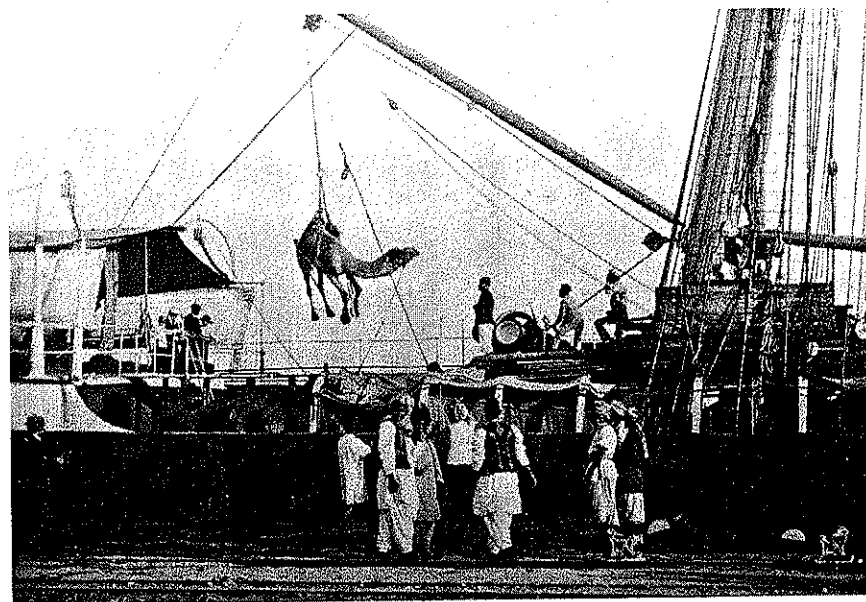


Figure 3.15 Unloading camels at Port Augusta, circa 1920. Mortlock Pictorial Collection, Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia.

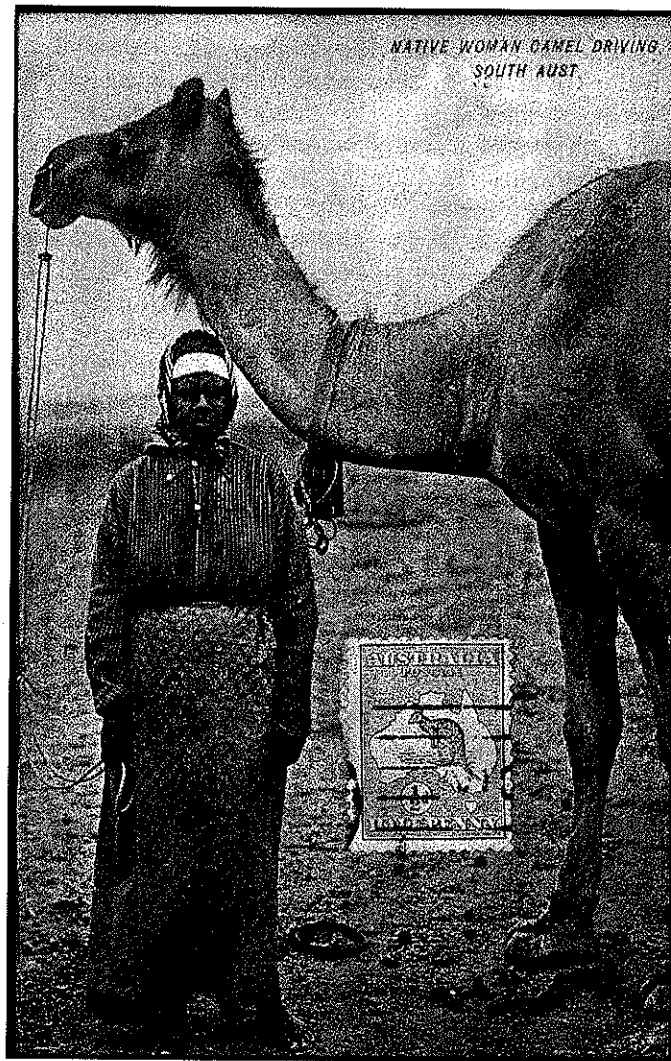


Figure 3.16 Native woman camel driving, postcard 1913. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

their businesses going through periods of severe drought, several crashes in wool prices, and economic recession.³⁴

What did camels eat? Camels, as we know, are hardy creatures that can survive on the vegetation in arid zones. They are fairly flexible in their foraging habits, and can browse on both shrubs and grasses. Nearly 80 percent of the vegetation types in the arid parts of inland Australia are edible for camels. But camels, being browsers, are also selective: they like fresh forage and show distinct preferences for particular plant species. The foraging

preferences of camels and cattle are quite different. Cattle prefer grasses, and only forage on shrubs and trees when fresh grass is not available; in contrast, camels prefer eating leaves and pods from trees and shrubs, and feed on grasses when tree forage is not available. Camels in Australia feed up to 95 percent on dicotyledons or leguminous plants, and only feed on grass during the wet season when forbs are not yet available.³⁵

Research on the foraging habits of camels in central Australia shows that there are between 340 to 350 plant species that are palatable to them. Of these palatable species, camels have a very strong preference for forty-four varieties of trees and shrubs. Among the twenty-two *Acacia* varieties palatable to them, camels are extremely fond of six species, of which two are immigrants: one is *Acacia farnesiana*, and the second is *Acacia nilotica*, another traveller across the Indian Ocean.³⁶ *A. nilotica* has a wide home range stretching from eastern and southern Africa all the way into northern India. It was introduced during the turn of the twentieth century into cattle and sheep stations in central and western Queensland. While official records state that *A. nilotica* was sourced from the Saharanpur Botanical Gardens in north-western India around 1897, some station owners claim that those who served in the Anglo-Boer wars and in the Afghan wars may have brought back the plant from these regions.³⁷ *A. nilotica*'s current distribution is limited to the western and northern Outback of Queensland and extends to parts of the Northern Territory. The plant was considered useful for the sheep industry in Queensland because its wide and relatively low canopy provided good shade and forage for sheep during the lambing and hot dry seasons.



Figure 3.17 Camels browsing prickly acacia, northwest Queensland. Courtesy of Anna Egan 2007.

Given that *A. farnesiana* is one of the varieties of acacia highly favoured by camels for browsing, it is likely that the plant's dispersal was aided to some extent by the droppings of the animals in grazing paddocks near the makeshift Afghan camps or "Ghan towns," and along transport routes across the Outback.³⁸ Since *A. farnesiana* is resilient and can regenerate quickly and vigorously after heavy browsing, it is likely to have thrived in the areas traversed by camels. Baker mentions the enthusiasm with which camels browsed on trees with thorns, and notes their special fondness for a particular prickly tree (most likely *A. farnesiana*)—which he does not name, but describes as similar to the "Mexican mesquite tree" (*Prosopis spp.*)—as the "number one camel feed."³⁹

Camel transport in the Outback declined in the 1920s due to a combination of climatic, technological, and economic factors. The long drought between 1925 and 1929, the arrival and gradual spread of motorised vehicles, and the Great Depression placed extraordinary pressures on camel

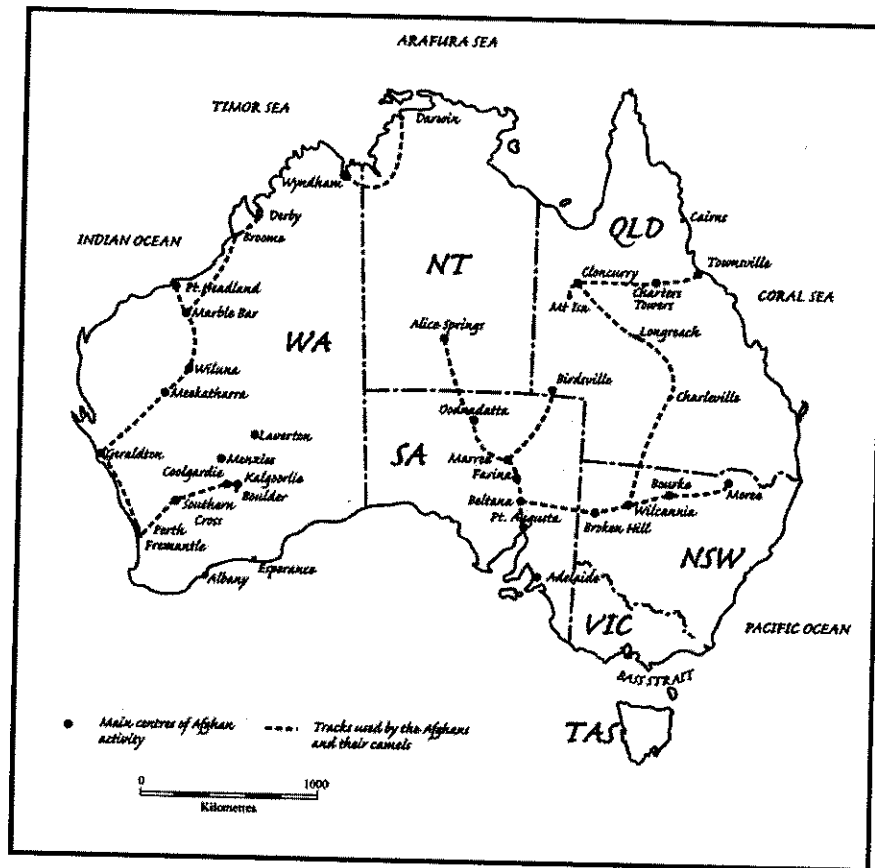


Figure 3.18 Centres of Afghan activity and pack camel routes. Based on Stevens 1989 and Baker 1964.

haulage businesses. In addition, increased agistment rates imposed by governments made it more expensive to feed and maintain the animals, and forced most camel operators into debt and penury. Afghan cameleers were denied citizenship by the new immigration laws instituted after Federation in 1901,⁴⁰ so most had little option but to release their camels into the unoccupied Outback and return to their country. Herbert Baker recounted meeting in 1927 one of the last remaining group of Afghan cameleers in the Marble Bar district of Western Australia, whose pack transport business had been bankrupt with the coming of motor lorries. They travelled some thirty miles inland from Marble Bar, and drove their pack of hundred or more camels across a low range of hills and watched them disappear over the ridge into unoccupied country. As Baker rode up to one of the Afghan cameleers, the old man said: "I say good-bye, my camel!"; he writes:

I did not speak; he seemed so deep in thought I felt it best to wait till he got things straightened out. I had appeared at an extremely critical moment, perhaps the saddest, of a hard life. Finally he turned and said: "Fifty years I stop this country, work all the time, now I finish."⁴¹

By the 1940s and 1950s, camels became a rare sight in Outback towns and transport routes, and almost none of their Afghan handlers or their makeshift "Ghan towns" remained. As Baker observed, both "Afghans and camels were unwanted in the automobile age."⁴²

The projected distribution of *A. farnesiana* differs across the unoccupied and occupied Outback.⁴³ The release of camels into the unoccupied Outback may have contributed to the further spread of *A. farnesiana*, but the plant is likely to have been kept in check by their browsing preference



Figure 3.19 Last camel train used in central Australia to deliver mail, December 1925. Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia.

and ability to digest the seed to a substantial extent through rumination.⁴⁴ The spread of *A. farnesiana* in the occupied Outback is likely to have occurred through a different combination of factors. Recurrent collapse of wool prices through the 1930s to the 1960s led many inland pastoralists to reduce sheep numbers and restock their stations with cattle. Cattle, like sheep, browse on trees and shrubs such as *A. farnesiana* and *A. nilotica* during the dry season when fresh grasses are not available; but unlike sheep (and camels), cattle do not sufficiently break down acacia seeds through their rumination, with the result that the seeds may be relatively undamaged as they pass through the animal's digestive system. They remain dormant until the wet season when the cattle dung provides congenial conditions for the embedded seeds to germinate and enables the seedlings to establish fairly quickly. *A. farnesiana*'s distribution in the occupied Outback has thus been aided by the conversion from a sheep- to cattle-based economy.

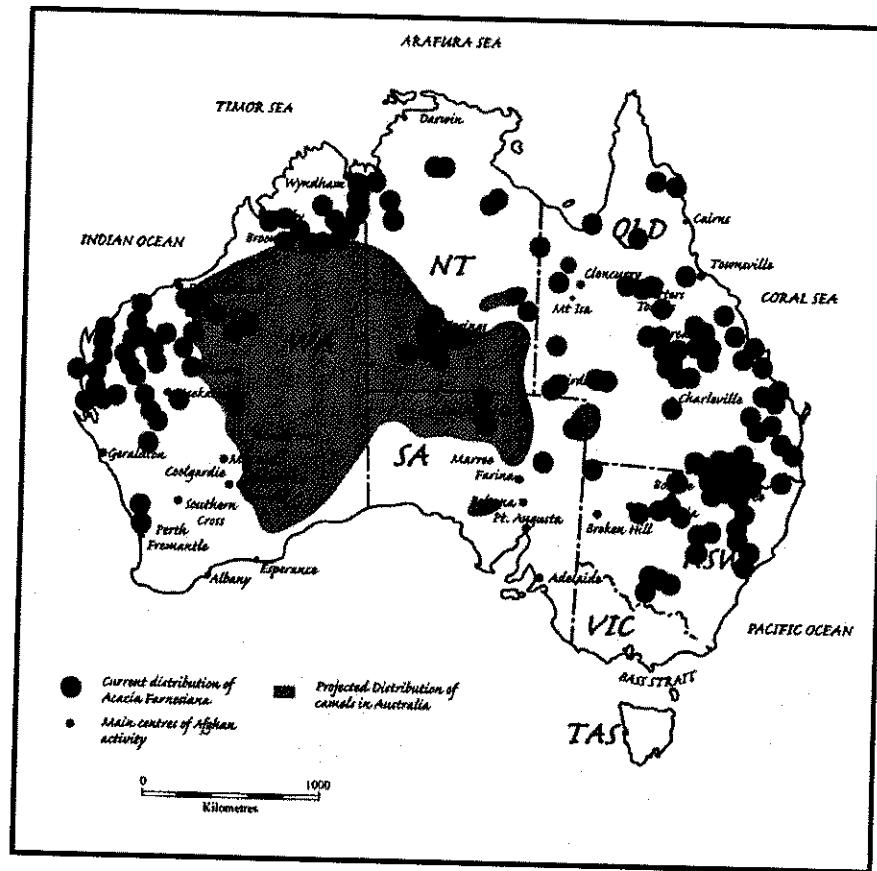


Figure 3.20 Projected distribution of *A. Farnesiana* and camels in the Outback. Based on Flora of Australia Online 2007, Stevens 1988, Baker 1964, Siebert and Newman 1989.

RE-VISIONING THE OUTBACK

Today, *A. farnesiana* and its fellow oceanic traveller, *A. nilotica*, are considered weeds in various parts of the occupied Outback because their thorny presence make cattle mustering more difficult, and because they reduce grazing areas when they occur in dense stands.⁴⁵ But unlike *A. nilotica*, *A. farnesiana* has escaped classification as a “Weed of National Significance” because it arrived in the continent before 1788. Although *A. nilotica* is not as widespread as *A. farnesiana* and is limited to parts of central and northern Queensland and small parts of the Northern Territory, both its identity and fate have been determined on the basis of its post-1788 arrival. Natural resource management agencies in Queensland identify *A. nilotica* as an “introduced” and “invasive” species and have targeted it for extermination from the landscape.⁴⁶

A. farnesiana offers a way of looking beyond the historical barrier of 1788, of seeing the Outback as connected by old and new movements across lands and oceans, and as an inland landscape that records these travels and migrations. While *A. farnesiana*'s enigma of arrival may have won it current reprieve from being condemned as an invasive immigrant and targeted for extermination, its presence also problematises the logic underlying botanical and ecological classifications of “native” and “introduced” species based on the date of British occupation of Australia. Being neither native nor introduced, *A. farnesiana*'s presence in the Australian Outback calls for a more open and dynamic way of thinking about “nativeness” and “natural” landscapes.

Herbert Baker was of the view that “[o]n saltbush-mulga country there was no other animal that thrived as well as the camel and none, with the exception of kangaroos and emus, that suited the landscape so perfectly.”⁴⁷ The same could be said for the camel's favourite acacia species; together these pre- and post-1788 travellers across the Indian Ocean were fundamental to the making of the Outback, in making its nature and landscape visible and comprehensible to a population that clung to its parochial Anglo-Celtic visions of Empire and to the coastal edge of the continent.

The cartographic visualisation of Australia in early Portuguese maps shows a coastline of openings, possibilities, and connections to the world of the Indian Ocean. Sir Thomas Livingstone Mitchell saw his expedition across the interior of the continent as a way of drawing Australia into what he called “the Indian Archipelago,” of linking old and new movements, connections, memories, and histories. That he recorded in passing, without any expression of surprise, the presence of *A. farnesiana*—a plant he would have recognised from his past travels in Portugal and India—near the Belyando River in interior Queensland might indicate his openness to seeing the inland as connected, rather than isolated, from the Indian Ocean world.

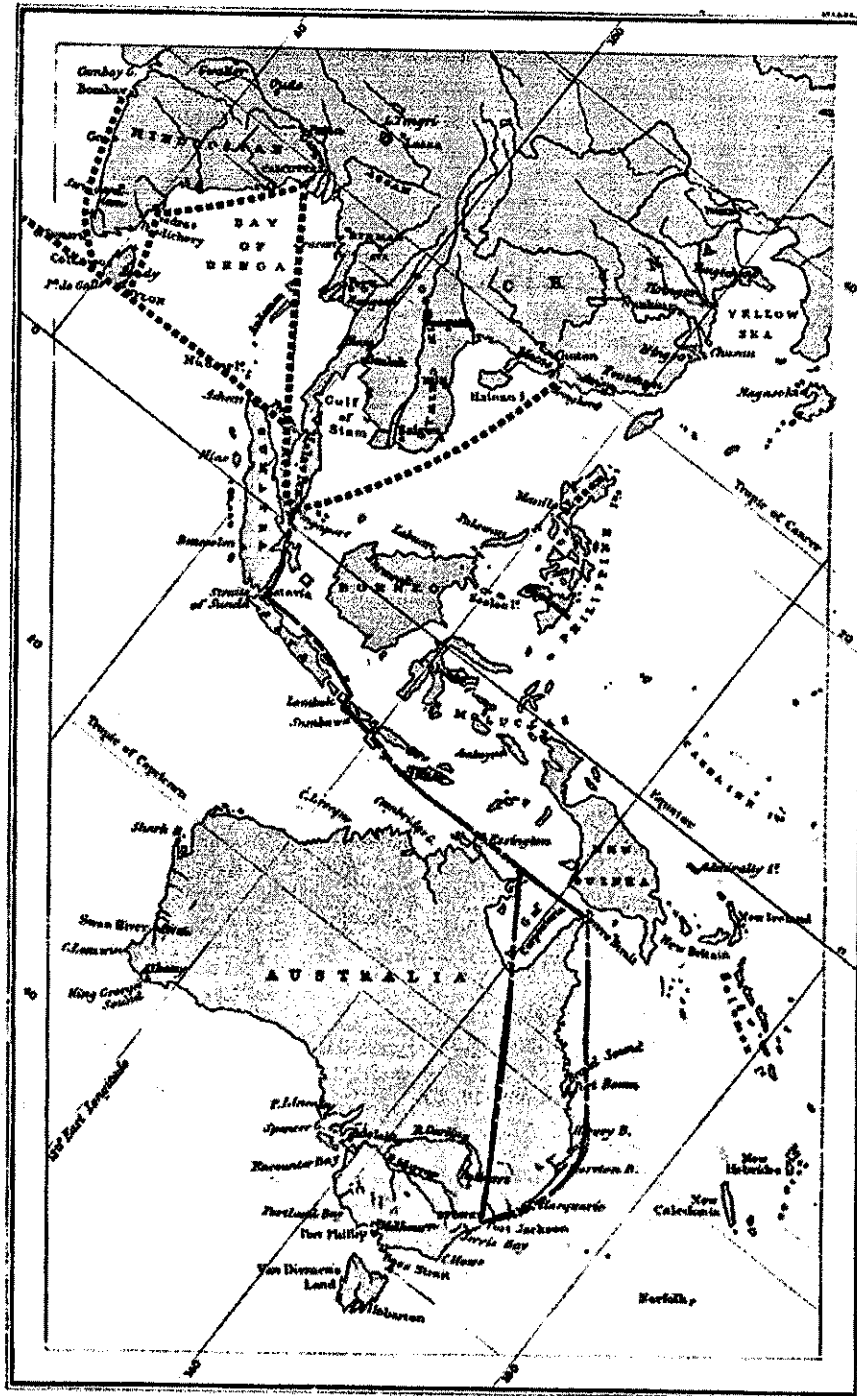


Figure 3.21 "The Indian Archipelago." T.L. Mitchell, 1848.

If the Outback is to figure in the articulation of an authentic nativeness or Australianness, then these Indian Ocean travellers and migrants to inland Australia must be seen as an integral part of that imagining. *A. farnesiana*, the camel, and *A. nilotica* may be judged useless by today's economic calculus or considered non-native, feral, and invasive by botanists and conservation agencies, but their very presence in the Outback landscape signals the possibility of a richer, more generous, eclectic consciousness of the continent's geographical history and imagining of Australian identity.

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7. "Girt by sea" is a phrase that appears in the Australian national anthem.
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11. K. McIntyre, *The Secret Discovery of Australia: Portuguese Ventures 250 Years Before Captain Cook* (first published in 1977; Sydney: Picador, 1982). McIntyre refers to the Wandjina paintings discovered by George Grey near Collier Bay.
 12. S. Yarrow, *We Discovered an Island* (Booragoon, WA: Regency Publications, 1980).
 13. McIntyre provides an extensive analysis of the Dauphin map and explains how Portuguese navigators used the cartographic conventions and methods of projection to draw this map. He superimposes the drawing on present methods of projection to show how this outline resembles the current representations of Australia. Some anomalies in McIntyre's interpretation of the maps have been resolved by Peter Trickett in his excellent attempt to establish Portuguese discoveries of Australia. See P. Trickett, *Beyond Capricorn: How Portuguese Adventurers Secretly Discovered and Mapped Australia and New Zealand 250 Years Before Captain Cook* (Adelaide: East Street Publications, 2007).
 14. "Nuca Antara" is probably a Portuguese rendering of the Javanese-Malay term "Nusantara," in which "nusa" stands for nation, and "antara" means beyond (i.e., transnational territories that make up "the whole" world of interaction). Vlekke notes that the original meaning is "the other islands" as seen from Java or Bali, and hence it took the more general meaning of "the outside world" or "abroad." Javanese texts of the fifteenth century use the term in this original sense. See B.H.M. Vlekke, *Nusantara: A History of Indonesia* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve Ltd., 1965), p. 6 n. 5.
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 21. A. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
 22. J.M. Powell, 56.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. Until 1858, the Australian colonies came under the administrative oversight of the East India Company Government in Calcutta; see T.L. Mitchell (1848) and also W.J. Lines, *Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia, 2nd edition* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 34.
 25. Mitchell, 3.
 26. C. Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghan Towns: A History of Afghan Cameldrivers in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13.

27. *Ibid.*, 28.
28. *Ibid.*, 13–14.
29. *Ibid.*, 28.
30. *Ibid.*, 31–33. The full names of the expedition leaders are Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills.
31. *Ibid.*, 34–56.
32. H., Baker, *Camels and the Outback* (Melbourne: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1964), 90.
33. Stevens, 261; A.K. Fazal, *Trade History of Afghan Cameleers in Australia, 1860–1935* (Kabul: UNO/Education Press, 2004).
34. Well-known pack camel routes linked inland settlements such as Marree, Farina, and Oodnadatta in South Australia across the Lake Eyre Basin and Simpson Desert to Alice Springs and Birdsville. In Western Australia and the Northern Territory, camels worked the track between Wiluna and Hall's Creek through the Great Sandy Desert and Gibson Desert, which later became the Canning Stock Route. They linked the inland mining settlements of Meekatharra, Marble Bar, and Wiluna with the coastal towns of Geraldton, Port Hedland, Derby, Broome, Wyndham, and Darwin, and the major mining towns of Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie to Fremantle. Camel trains operated between the mining settlements at Mount Isa, Dutchess, Cloncurry, and Charters Towers in northern Queensland, and carried ore and wool from Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Bourke, and Moree to railhead and ports in eastern New South Wales. See Stevens (1989) and Baker (1964, op. cit.), and P. Jones, and A. Kenny, *Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland, 1860s–1930s* (South Australian Museum, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2007).
35. B. Siebert, and D. Newman, "Camelidae," in *Fauna of Australia, Volume 1B, Mammalia*, eds. D. Walton, and B. Richardson, no. 60: 1–9 (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989); A. Phillips, J. Heucke, B. Dörge, and G. O'Reilly, *Co-grazing Cattle and Camels: A Report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation* (Canberra: RIRDC, 2001).
36. B. Dörge, J. Heucke, and R. Dance, *The Palatability of Central Australian Plant Species to Camels* (Alice Springs: Central Australian Camel Industry Association [CACIA]).
37. Field interviews carried out by the authors in April 2006, and by their research assistants, Anna Egan and Alyse Weyman in April–June 2007.
38. The distribution of *A. farnesiana* based on specimen collections in Australian herbaria shows a remarkable overlap with the centres of Afghan activity and transport routes.
39. Baker, op.cit., p.129. *A. farnesiana*, *A. nilotica*, *Prosopis spp.*, and *Parkinsonia spp.* are generally referred to as "prickle bushes" and often confused with each other. They are officially classified as "introduced" (excluding *A. farnesiana*, because it arrived before 1788) and "invasive" and targeted for control. See Spies, P. and March N., 2004. *Prickly Acacia National Case Studies Manual* (Cloncurry: Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy).
40. Australia's emergence as a nation and sense of identity at the time of Federation in 1901 was embodied in the establishment of the "White Australia" policy. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 passed by the government of Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, excluded "coloured people" from migrating to the country or awarding citizenship to those already in Australia. See Stevens, op. cit., 148; M. M. de Lepervanche, *Indians in a White Australia: An Account of Race, Class and Indian Immigration to Eastern Australia* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1984) 56–61.

41. Baker, H. op.cit., 2.
42. Baker, H. ibid.
43. This may in part reflect the methods used for specimen collections maintained in Australian herbaria. Since *A. farnesiana* is not officially classified as a weed of national significance, there are no map projections of the plant's spread and density.
44. Based on estimates of camel numbers during the 1920s and 1930s, some researchers have projected the current camel population to be over 600,000. Studies of camel distribution show their major concentration in the Great Sandy Desert, the Gibson and Simpson Deserts, and the Lake Eyre Basin, with minor and scattered concentrations in the areas near Marble Bar, between Hall's Creek and Tanami, Oodnadatta and Alice Springs, and near Birdsville, Mount Isa, and Cloncurry. See Siebert and Newman (1989). Also see B. Dörge, and J. Heucke, *Demonstration of Ecologically Sustainable Management of Camels on Aboriginal and Pastoral Land*. Final report on project number 200046 for the Natural Heritage Trust (Alice Springs: CACIA, 2003).
45. N. March, 2000. *Prickly Acacia Best Practice Manual* (Brisbane: Queensland Department of Natural Resources).
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47. Baker, op. cit., 129.

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<i>List of Figures</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiv
MICHAEL PEARSON	
1 Introduction: New Conjunctures in Maritime Imaginaries	1
SHANTI MOORTHY AND ASHRAF JAMAL	
2 Fabulation: Flying Carpets and Artful Politics in the Indian Ocean	32
STEPHEN MUECKE	
3 The Indian Ocean and the Making of Outback Australia: An Ecocultural Odyssey	45
HARIPRIYA RANGAN AND CHRISTIAN KULL	
4 Abdulrazak Gurnah and Littoral Cosmopolitanism	73
SHANTI MOORTHY	
5 Destined to Disappear Without a Trace: Gender and the Languages of Creolisation in the Indian Ocean, Africa, Brazil, and the Caribbean	103
FERNANDO ROSA RIBEIRO	
6 Commerce, Circulation, and Consumption: Indian Ocean Communities in Historical Perspective	136
LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN	

7	Shared Hopes, New Worlds: Indians, Australians, and Indonesians in the Boycott of Dutch Shipping, 1945–1949 HEATHER GOODALL	158
8	“Signs of Wonder”: The Postmortem Travels of Francis Xavier in the Indian Ocean World PAMILA GUPTA	197
9	Kuo Pao Kun’s <i>Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral</i> and the Myth of Modern Singapore SUSAN PHILIP	229
10	“That Great Ocean of Idealism”: Calcutta, the Tagore Circle, and the Idea of Asia, 1900–1920 MARK RAVINDER FROST	251
11	“Is It the Same Sea As Back Home?”: Transformative Complicities As Travelling Tropes in Fictions from Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and South Africa MIKI FLOCKEMANN	280
12	Making Home on the Indian Ocean Rim: Relocations in South African Literatures MEG SAMUELSON	298
13	A Travelling Science: Anthropometry and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean ROCHELLE PINTO	318
14	Whiteness in Golden Goa: Linschoten on Phenotype ARUN SALDANHA	339
15	Power and Beliefs in Reunion Island CHRISTIAN GHASARIAN	360
16	Through Magical Flowers: Tourism and Creole Self-fashioning in La Reunion DAVID PICARD	374

17	Black Bag ASHRAF JAMAL	397
18	Telling and Selling on the Indian Ocean Rim ASHRAF JAMAL	403
19	Post-Orientalism STEPHEN MUECKE	418
	<i>Contributors</i>	421
	<i>Index</i>	427