

THE
BALLAD
OF
ABDUL
WADE

RYAN BUTTA



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The author acknowledges that the stories told in this book occurred on Indigenous land and that sovereignty was never ceded.



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*To my father, a man who was happiest on the big rivers, the black soil
plains and the red dirt of western New South Wales*

‘Wade was a flamboyant and stylish entrepreneur,
with a passion for horse racing on the country circuits.
His employees treated him with such respect that he was
known locally as an “Afghan prince”.’

Australian Dictionary of Biography

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Prologue

In 2018, while travelling to visit my parents in the Hunter Valley, I stopped in at Brewarrina, on the banks of the Barwon River in north-west New South Wales. It had been my father's home town for decades. The son of Italian migrants, he had moved to the area as a teenager in the early 1950s.

I wanted to see if the local information centre had a copy of *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker*, the memoir of a local Aboriginal man. The book was to be a gift to replace my father's copy, which he had long since misplaced. When the man behind the desk told me they were out of stock, I instead came away with a colourful three-volume history of the town by local historian John George. I knew my father would enjoy flicking through Brewarrina's past, recognising names of old friends and haunts, most long gone and buried.

A few days later, looking through the books for myself, I came across a black-and-white photo of a long string of camels, standing two abreast on a dusty street in Brewarrina. The caption read, 'Camel team in Bathurst Street – late 1890s early 1900s.' Stated this way without further explanation, it was as if the camels had magically appeared of their own accord. I was fascinated. How did they get there? Who owned them? What were camels doing in the main street?

Until that moment, I'd thought I'd known this country out

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west. It was the country of my summers. School holidays with flies and fleeces and rouseabouts and cooks. A legendary bronc rider by the name of Splinter Bunyan. The shearing shed on Glenmore station. A red kelpie with liquid eyes staring out of a coat of dust and hair, tongue flapping in the hot, heavy air. One time, a swarm of bees in the beams of the shed and a smoking bucket of gum leaves to chase them out so the shearing could continue. And cat heads, always cat heads. Burrs to some, bindis to town folk, these evil little three-pronged buggers would be so thick on the ground that the walk for an evening piss only extended to the last cement step of the shearers' quarters. One stride beyond that onto the unpaved ground, and the tiny spikes of cat heads would pull you up short as if to say, where do you think you're going?

My time here as a boy had shaped me. It was the country of baking hot days and red claypans, burnt like the surface of *crème brûlée*. The names of the rivers here were transformed into magical chants. Culgoa, Barwon, Bogan, Namoi, Maranoa and Darling. During term time, conjuring the names on my lips was enough to transport me from a school desk to those clay banks under the river gums, stalking through scratchy stands of head-high lignum.

Even as a ten-year-old, I sensed my own insignificance in this vast land. On the Barwon at Brewarrina, I saw the timeless fish traps, or Baiame's Ngunnhu, of the Ngemba people, which had been built and maintained over thousands of years. Above me was always the endless blue sky, too expansive to take in entirely. The best you could do was tilt your head skyward and let that blue flood your body, let the vastness in. You are nothing, the sky seemed to say. You will pass.

After that visit to my parents as an adult, I headed home with the photo of the camels lodged in my mind. I stopped again in

PROLOGUE

Brewarrina, sure that I would find quick answers to my questions. That would be that, and the mystery of the camels would be solved. But as it turned out, that wasn't that at all.

My queries at the information centre led me an hour further west, down the B76 highway to Bourke. 'That's where the Afghan camp was,' I was told.

I had taken my first step on the trail of Abdul Wade.

Part 1

Before Abdul Wade

Chapter 1

‘It grabs you by the agates,’ Jim said. His weathered hand made a claw, calloused fat fingers pointing skywards. He clenched the claw, and my own agates – testicles, to city folk – flinched involuntarily. ‘And it doesn’t let you go.’

Jim (not his real name) was talking about the red dirt we were standing on, about 150 kilometres west of Bourke. The red dirt that stretched east and west and went on until it hit that stark blue sky. It was that red dirt that stains deep: cloth, skin, fingernails and souls. It grabs you and never lets go.

‘Come on,’ Jim said, marching toward his four-wheel-drive ute. ‘We’ll take my vehicle.’ He shot a disdainful glance at my little Holden Barina, nudged into the shade of a lone mulga tree. Jim didn’t even consider it a car – not for out there. My father would probably have compared the Barina to the Pope’s nuts, with a word on the futility of both. This country had had Dad by the agates for sixty years.

I tried to find some legroom in Jim’s passenger seat, but the place where feet normally go was filled with the mechanical necessities of bush life. There were pipes and tubes and metal thingamabobs, whamsamajigs and doodads. I imagined they were carburettors and dipsticks and spark plugs and all sorts of words that I’d heard

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pronounced by men in oil-stained overalls, as they wiped greasy hands on a greasy rag.

The day before, when I'd been asking around town for someone to show me Wangamana Station – the vast pastoral holding that Abdul Wade bought in the early 1900s and turned into a camel breeding operation – a postman I'd met suggested I go see Jim.

'What kind of car have you got?' the postie had asked. I'd interrupted his route down the main street of Bourke. Over his shoulder I could see my little car, nose in the gutter, covered in red dirt.

'I don't know,' I'd said, immediately knowing that this was not a good answer.

When I pointed out my car, the postman laughed. 'If it doesn't rain, you might have a chance.'

'And if it rains?'

'Oh, if it rains, you're fucked. But you should be right. Hasn't rained in years.'

I'd made a note to learn the name of the car I drove.

In Jim's four-wheel drive, the dusty road bucked and bent beneath us. His thick fingers were wrapped around the wheel as he manoeuvred, sometimes fighting the deep ruts, and other times letting the ruts have their way, the vehicle gliding through.

I adjusted my feet against what I was fairly certain was a spare fan belt. The thongs I was wearing looked out of place. Yes, they made the colour pop on my floral-print board shorts, but compared to Jim in his boots and khaki shorts, I looked ridiculous. I should have known better than to go out there dressed like that; I knew this was no place for thongs. I could feel Jim's disapproval, even as he stared straight ahead through the small patch of windscreen that the wipers had reclaimed from the red dirt. I tucked my shameful

thonged feet below an old soft-drink bottle filled with water.

‘When are you heading back to the city?’ Jim asked.

‘Day after tomorrow,’ I said.

‘I’m flying to Dubbo tomorrow.’ Something in the way Jim said this suggested that he would actually be doing the flying. ‘Then down to Sydney.’ He looked out the window, his ginger-haired head bobbling, as a series of ruts swayed us from one side of the road to the other.

‘The quack,’ Jim added, unprompted.

Agates and quacks. Red-dirt speak. I didn’t say anything. I could feel the sweat damming above my eyebrows.

‘Vietnam,’ he said, by way of explanation. ‘I was fine, then a few years back the wheels came off.’

Jim suddenly stopped the car. He didn’t pull over, just parked in the middle of the road. Handbrake on. Ignition off. The drive had shaken the water in the soft-drink bottle, and algae was floating around in it like a green blizzard in a snow globe. Jim was already swinging a leg out the door when he said, ‘Let’s take a walk.’

I followed him into the thick scrub.

‘I don’t like to drive off the road,’ he said. ‘If people see tyre tracks heading away from the road, they’ll follow them just for a look. People like nosing about.’

I wondered who he could possibly mean. We were miles from anywhere out here. Just me and Jim.

A few yards in, the bush closed behind me. Then, a searing, crippling pain. In my agony, I saw that the ground was covered in cat heads. The three-pronged barbs were hard as stone, and one of them was buried in my heel. Jim waited for me to dig it out. Disgusted.

Removing the cat head, I inspected my throbbing foot. There

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was a bubble of bright red blood where the long thorn had penetrated.

Jim was moving again. I limped along behind. Pushing aside some scrub, I found him with hands on hips. Before him, arranged in a rectangle, were four metal posts, no more than a foot high, rusted and leaning at odd angles. A single strand of wire hung between them, slack.

‘Grave,’ Jim said. ‘This used to be the Tinchelooka Hotel. Years ago now, of course. Two babies they buried here. That’s why I don’t like anyone to know I come here. Don’t want anyone poking their noses in.’

There was a respect for the dead in Jim’s voice that I found disarming. More than a hundred years had passed; these babies were born to people he never knew, but he cared about these graves.

‘The mother of these babies used to work here at the hotel,’ Jim said. ‘It was a shanty where travellers, mainly shearers, could stop for a drink and where the mail coach would change horses. The government bore was just over there.’ He pointed into the scrub. ‘Wherever there was a bore and water for the horses and stock, there’d be a hotel that sold grog. People leased the bores off the government. And just up the road from here is Wangamana Station, owned by the camel-driver Abdul Wade.’

Jim pronounced Abdul’s surname in a way that made it rhyme with ‘body’ – although Abdul seemed to have deliberately changed the spelling to make it easier for Westerners to pronounce (rhyming with ‘laid’). Abdul Wade. Pioneer, entrepreneur, crack shot, traveller, gambler, grazier, bushman, Muslim, Australian. The man I had come to find.

Chapter 2

In the information centre at Bourke, in an exhibition room dedicated to the historic characters of the area, I found Harry 'Breaker' Morant. Alongside him was Will Ogilvie, the young Scottish poet who spent a decade in the far west. There too was Henry Lawson, who spent nine months in the area and twenty years complaining about those nine months in verse and prose. The famed bush poet also had two monuments in the town park. Another forefather on the wall was Edward Millen: 'Bourke's homegrown grazier, editor, environmentalist, yarnspinner, debater and politician.' Homegrown – but born and bred in England, I noted.

And then I came face to face with Abdul Wade.

He was standing in a punt. He was well dressed in moleskins, a white shirt and a dark blazer and tie, with a trilby hat on his head. He looked like any other colonial gentleman of the time. Clean-shaven except for a small moustache, he stared directly at the camera, confident, one hand on an oar. Beside him, a boy scratched at his neck in what looked like an act of impatience or boredom captured in time. Also in the punt were three uniformed officers, most likely policemen, a youthful-looking Aboriginal man, an older white settler and a young girl. In the background, trees protruded from the floodwaters. The caption accompanying the photo, at odds with

his gentlemanly, serene appearance, did not paint Abdul Wade in the best light:

In 1891 a petition was presented to the NSW government to restrict the use of camels in the Bourke district by Mr Abdul Wade and his Asiatic horde. This hostility came largely from the horse and bullock teamsters, threatened by the greater efficiency of the camels over long waterless distances. There were ugly incidents. Camels caused horses to panic and so when a horse team and a camel team met there was inevitably a fight.

The inscription went on to detail the conflicts between the camel-drivers and the bullockies. When a camel train was ambushed on the Wanaaring road, a violent brawl broke out, sending camels scattering with their loads. A camel-driver was hurled off the bridge at North Bourke. The Afghan camp on the edge of town was raided numerous times by young troublemakers, otherwise known as larrikins. Abdul Wade armed his men for self-defence on the road, while mounted troopers had to escort camel teams coming in from Queensland.

Armed escorts? Men being thrown from bridges? A petition to restrict the use of camels? My mind was reeling. I imagined a Bourke in open warfare, overrun by camels. I needed to know more. And, transfixed by the man in the photograph, I wanted to know what role Abdul Wade himself had played in all this.

Back home, I began to find some clues. I read every book I could find on the camel-drivers who came to Australia at the end of the 19th century. It is not a large bibliography, with Dr Christine Stevens' *Tin Mosques & Ghantowns* being the most comprehensive. However, the few accounts I found of Abdul Wade were consistent

– he was portrayed as a cunning and lucky gambler, a fallen Muslim and an exploiter of men.

All the more intrigued by the notion of an Afghan villain who roamed the far west of New South Wales, I started looking for Abdul Wade in the newspapers of the day. I spent hours scouring the Australian library database Trove, devouring every mention, every reference, every complaint about Abdul Wade and his ‘Asiatic horde’. After many weeks, I realised that the only thing I knew for sure about the man named Abdul Wade was that his name was not Abdul Wade. In short, almost everything that was written about Abdul Wade in modern histories was wrong. Even the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* had got it wrong. Name wrong. Date of birth wrong. Key events in Wade’s life out by decades. The image I unearthed was very different to the snippets that the history books recorded of his life.

And, as I discovered each error in this enigmatic figure’s biography, a greater error in the recorded history of colonial Australia also began to emerge. In many ways, it was an error of omission. Abdul Wade established himself in Bourke in the 1890s – a formative decade in the history of Australia, when writers led by Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson were capturing the emerging forms of a national character. These writers offered up a celebrated version of the Australian bush and those who made their homes there. But there was nothing about camels and Afghans.

It was time to set the record straight.