

From History to Fiction: Writing Taj and the Great Camel Trek

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Writing Taj

Taj and the Great camel trek (Taj) began with the picture book *Mustara*.

Although I loved explorer stories as a child, my first motivation to write *Mustara* came when I was helping Afghan students with their English homework and I couldn't find any fiction about Afghans for them to read. Later I read how Ernest Giles truly had a camel called Mustara in his string when I was researching camels for *Zenna Dare* and Taj's story was born. Robert Ingpen did such beautiful paintings for the book and every time I got to the last page where the expedition is setting off I had the feeling Taj's story wasn't finished.

Research

Afghans

I lived in Pakistan for over seven years and during that time met Afghan refugees. In the time we were there three million came across the border. When we returned home I met more Afghan refugees in Adelaide. Over that time I picked up cultural and social nuances and learned to respect their worldview eg about honour and shame, hospitality, respect for elders. I went to Pakistan in 2006 on an Asialink Fellowship and collected folktales that Taj's father would know. Some years before I had travelled to Beltana and met some Afghan descendants and this all helped to create Taj and give me the background for Saleh Mahomed.

I researched **Afghans in Australia** and found in 1860, 24 camels were shipped from Karachi to Port Melbourne as baggage animals for the Burke and Wills trip. Three camel drivers came with them. Saleh Mohamed was not one of them even though I say he is in the book. On 31 December 1865, thirty-one camel drivers, including Saleh Mahomed first arrived in South Australia with 124 camels. Many of the men were from Afghanistan. Thomas Elder imported the camels and they became the nucleus of a stud at his property in Beltana. The camels were used for cartage but also the Afghans and their camels played an important part in opening up the Australian continent.

The Afghans were involved in transport, exploration, supplying homesteads and mining camps, carting ores, wool, timber, stones, water, railway sleepers, and delivering the mail. They took part in projects such as the Overland Telegraph Line, the Transcontinental Railway Line, the Rabbit Proof Fence and Canning Stock Route. Some of the exploration trips were only successful because of the expertise and endurance of the camel drivers. Afghan camel drivers also contributed to the war effort of WW1.

The camel drivers were denied citizenship in Australia and could not bring their wives and families. Cigler and Stevens (1989) were the first authors to write about the Afghans themselves and not just the camels or the explorers. About 3000 Afghans took part in the camel-driving work and for nearly sixty years played an important part in the outback until the truck reached the outback in the 1930s. Islam in Australia is one of the most important cultural contributions of the camel drivers. Afghan refugees and Afghan asylum seekers come to South Australia to escape the war in Afghanistan. There is an Afghan Association in Adelaide.

Camels

I lived in the desert in the United Arab Emirates for two and a half years and saw many camels. Near Kapunda there is a camel farm so I visited that and met an old cameleer, Mr Hampel who loves his camels and still wears shalwar qameezes, even though I doubt he is Afghan. I went to the Marree Camel Cup and saw camels racing which was the inspiration for the first chapter in *Taj*. Recently I met the camels at the Tarlee Camel Farm. Jim Talbot rescues feral camels from the wild and rehabilitates them. He has bred a few from these and now has ten camels. I also read lots of books on camels including Janeen Brian's *Hoosh*.

Explorers – Ernest Giles

I bought a copy of Giles' journals, *Australia Twice Traversed* and read them. Then in the State Library I researched the other men of the team and found articles in newspapers of the time that they had written, and Geographical Society articles. Some of these were on microfiche. I found a book by Geoffrey Dutton about Ernest Giles being the last explorer. I live in the country so the State Library sent information up to Kapunda for me to read in the library here. I even looked up words for Tommy in a *Wirangu Language* book, just to be sure Ernest Giles had written his speech correctly. Compass and instruments.

Maps.

The Writing Process

When I felt I had done enough research (though it also continued throughout the writing process) I began writing Taj's story as a diary based on the explorers' diaries and papers. I wanted the story to come through Taj's eyes and be intimate, however I knew he wouldn't be able to write a diary. How could I write something for children like Peter Carey did in 'The True story of Ned Kelly' including all his bad grammar and no punctuation. There are other pros and cons of writing in diary form as Alan Tucker (children's historical author) points out. For me the cons won; I felt too confined by the diary form and when I had finished that draft I wrote it again in 3rd person. I toyed with creative non fiction but found more freedom of expression in a novel structure. Taj could explore his relationships more and I didn't have to have him learning to write if I didn't want to. At first I wrote the novel for young adults and Taj turned fourteen on the trek but I was told young adults may not read a story that they would feel is more for twelve year olds, so I wrote the novel again with an audience of 9-13 year olds.

I wanted Taj to have his own story with problems in his personal life eg about his mother leaving, as he believes; his relationship with his father, why don't they talk more? And living in Australia knowing he has an Afghan and Muslim heritage. I rewrote it in first person so Taj would be closer to the reader since history is a place faraway for children. During this time I listened to music that suited the manuscript, watched Afghan films, read adult novels with Afghan characters and searched for Afghan proverbs and stories. I think stories are important to include in a novel about a people group as they show much of the culture and how people of that culture think.

Fact to fiction

I also wanted to be true to historical records but use a fictitious main character, 13 year old Taj Saleh, so any perceptions of these real though dead people would be through his eyes and therefore fictitious (though based on me reading between the lines of the primary documents).

In every work of fiction there is research but I found it very difficult in this book achieving the balance between the true historical account and the fiction of Taj's perceptions. On the one hand I wanted young readers to be able to experience the trip as it really was, but on the other it needed to be a story that engaged the reader's imagination and interest. Always the biggest question for me was how close to what actually happened should I write it? And did I have any right not to? I wasn't there so I was guided by what Ernest Giles and the other explorers wrote. The journey from explorers' writing to diary form, to novel form took a long time. Even when I wrote up the story as a novel, the first few drafts still sounded like a diary or a travel log. One early reader thought it was episodic, ie made up of separate loosely connected episodes, which mightn't always hang together. This was probably a hangover from writing it as a diary.

In historical fiction history propels the story but mustn't swamp it. I knew I had to weave facts into the fiction and the story must take precedence. I found it hard to come to terms with the fact that the story mattered more than the history. I remembered hearing Kevin Rabalais (2009) say he didn't look at his research when he wrote *The Landscape of Desire* (2008) and when he couldn't remember if what he was writing was research or something he made up he knew he was telling a story. I realised then that the story had to become Taj's and also that the historical events might have to be rearranged slightly to make a good story arc for children to sustain interest. The camels didn't exactly race across that desert – it was an agonising trek continually searching for water.

After that I worked harder at making Taj read like a story where all parts of that story connect and make a difference to the whole, rather than like an account or report. I wrote scenes where Taj talked and acted with the other characters. In rewriting I strengthened the relationships in the story, eg between Taj & his father so there is a richer relationship between them with scenes showing Padar's grief and therefore showing the difficulties in their relationship. I created more scenes with Tommy and Taj so the reader could understand better the jealousy that Taj has for him and why he finds Tommy annoying. There are scenes with Emmeline in the early part of the story and she becomes the inspiration in Taj's thoughts to help him keep going. I tried to make all the relationships in the story grow and develop.

Novelist Cindy Valler quotes Andrew M. Greely: 'The purpose of history is to narrate events as accurately as one can. The purpose of historical fiction is to enable a reader through the perspective of characters in the story to feel that he/she is present at the events. Such a goal obviously requires some modification of the events.' In a way I imaginatively reconstructed the past for young readers.

I had to cut **events** that were in Giles' journals but didn't propel the plot forwards or add character development to Taj's story. I had wanted to have the story as true as possible so readers could check the events on a map and against any non fiction they may read, but it would have become too long, and maybe even boring for some, so I learned to think of Taj's story as the real story and the expedition as the backdrop to Taj's story. Taj's fears and joys, his insecurities from believing his mum left him came to the fore and it became a story of a character on an expedition rather than a set of episodes about an expedition seen by a character. It is a subtle change in attitude but made all the difference to the story. Now the novel is based on or inspired by Ernest Giles' expedition even though some details have been left out and others have been changed. The things I did change are mentioned in an Author Note.

Finally I reconciled the changing of these historical facts and making up some others so as to be able to tell Taj's story. It's surprising now how long this process took me. Guess I was concerned about the ethics of what I was doing. Because Taj is fictitious I had to create situations, e.g. that the real camel driver, Saleh Mohamed had a son called Taj. It was Jess Young who fell off his camel, although Taj does in the novel. The expedition did really meet Charlie, Albert and Billy in the desert but it's not true that they took Tommy. I made Ramadan to be in September that year, not October to create more narrative tension. Mustara was a fully grown bull. It's true that he was the greatest kisser of all the camels. Many of the other camels' names are real eg Pearl, Reechy and Buzoe. Tommy actually joined the expedition in Port Augusta but it was a creative decision to have him start in Beltana so he could race against Taj, thus setting up some friction between them, and Taj's reticence to become friends.

To strength the plotline I had to cut a few **characters** as well. There was another camel driver, Coogee Mohamed who was on the trip from Beltana to Port Augusta, but I decided I couldn't keep characters who wouldn't be in the story all the way through. I cut Jimmy, Tommy's relative too and many of the times Tommy finds water near the beginning were really Jimmy's finds. I cut a minor fictitious character, Ali, deleted a story, and made the other stories shorter to heighten pace. I also tightened the overall pace considerably by deleting short scenes which I thought slowed the action, and also by having less chapters and incorporating material from two chapters into one. I managed to cut 5,000 words from the final manuscript. The story became tighter with more tension, and had a more heightened richness in the relationships.

There is the ethical issue too of whether we can write about something out of our experience. Once I got to the point I could fictionalise history slightly, I still felt I couldn't tell Tommy's stories. I had permission to relate Ngadjuri stories in my new novel *The Messenger Bird*, but I took them out in a later draft partly due to story arc and keeping it tight, and only referred to them. Tommy is without a dreaming, so I couldn't have him tell a story in Taj when he wouldn't have heard it. I wanted to write the history as a story to show modern day children what it might have been like, to give meaning as author Maria Tumarkin explains, and to appreciate the things in their lives today they have because of camel drivers and explorers. I agree with NZ author Diana Menefy who says: 'I like to think I use integrity when dealing with real people, writers have a moral obligation to the dead, after all, they can't defend themselves.'

I think to date this is the hardest thing I've attempted: translating nineteenth century explorers' writings into a story for modern children while still keeping the integrity of history and of story. It is an interesting debate whether history can be portrayed as true in a novel. Turner-Bissett (2005, p.85) states history itself is the imaginative reconstruction of the past using what evidence we can find. Historians probably don't believe novelists have enough evidence and we do manipulate it for the sake of the story. I think if we admit we are writing a story and not postulating that we are writing it as the only way it happened then we are on safe ground. In the ways that matter, Taj's story is true. The life lessons he learns are lessons we all can relate to as true in life.

Using Taj in the classroom

Some quotes from the Australian National Curriculum: History is a disciplined process of inquiry into the past that develops students' curiosity and imagination. Awareness of history is an essential characteristic of any society, and historical knowledge is fundamental to understanding ourselves and others. It helps students

appreciate how the world and its people have changed, as well as the significant continuities that exist to the present day (Australian National Curriculum). There are many ways to foster this historical inquiry eg using objects, storytelling, role playing, drama, using historical records like diaries, maps, and using images. I have been reading a good book by Rosie Turner-Bisset (2005) that outlines the use of these in the classroom.

Looking at the National Curriculum I can see that *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* will fit the program in a few levels.

Year 4 Exploration, Aboriginal issues.

Year 5 Colonial Australia and migration.

Year 6 Australia as a nation: who came to Australia? What contribution have groups made to the development of Australian society? Also Aboriginal Rights.

Year 7 The Silk Road. Afghan society is an ancient civilisation in this area.

There are **themes** in Taj which interconnect which can be used in a classroom setting for research and activities and to introduce and draw student into the historical period.

Reading the book itself will lend itself to the study of the history of the time.

1. Identity & culture - there are 5 cultures in the expedition: Afghan, Indigenous, English, Scottish, Cornish
2. History and explorers
3. Explorers and their relationships with Indigenous people
4. Family relationships, friendship
5. Fear, grief
6. Perseverance, leadership & survival
7. And of course the contribution the Afghan camel drivers made to our state.

There are **Teacher Notes** on my website under Books/Taj and the Great Camel Trek as well as at UQP's website.

The difference between *Mustara* and *Taj* as written forms is interesting to discuss.

Artefacts

If the study of history is based on evidence derived from remains of the past as the Australian Curriculum states, let's look at objects.

I use objects a lot – for ideas, for giving me atmosphere, inspiration. They work for children too quite often as story starters. But how else can we use them?

Children can be taught to interpret objects from their own life and society and then make links between themselves and the past. Young children may not relate to a lantern but if you started with a torch, they might make the leap easier. Turner-Bisset outlines all the ways objects can develop skills, extend knowledge and develop concepts (2005, p. 32-33). Many are cross curricular. Objects work better than pictures of objects as details can be lost like smell, texture, weight, the feeling of age.

Questioning. The national Curriculum states the process of historical inquiry develops transferrable skills, such as the ability to ask relevant questions and critically analyse and interpret sources. It's important to handle questions about historical objects well. It's best not to ask how old it is. Discussion gets bogged down and younger children won't understand the time frame. Nor bother with what it is at first. I often have an object in a bag or basket or box and have children volunteer to open the box. I have a basket with a lock and key that works wonderfully. The anticipation is high by the time the snow leopard e.g. is revealed. They still mightn't know what sort

of leopard it is but we check its big feet – what would they be suitable for walking on. The long tail. The whitish fur. In what landscape would he be happiest and camouflaged the best? Why would he have such a thick coat?

Questions need to be open. Eg a tin mug

What does it look like?

What does it feel like?

What do you think it is made of?

Have you seen anything like it?

How was it used?

Who used to use it?

What would it be like to use it?

(Turner-Bisset 2005, p.34.)

Looking at Objects (2)

from Figure 3.3 ‘Learning from Objects’, (Turner-Bisset 2005, p. 37)

Things to think about

Physical features

What does it look and feel like?

Some further Questions eg an old camel bell

What colour is it?

What does it smell like?

What does it sound like?

What is it made of?

Is it a natural or manufactured material?

Is the object complete?

Has it been altered, adapted, mended?

Is it worn?

Construction

How was it made?

Is it handmade or machine made?

Was it made in a mould or in pieces?

How has it been fixed together?

Design

Is it well designed?

Does it do the job it was intended to do well?

Were the best materials used?

Is it decorated? How?

Do you like the way it looks?

Value

What is it worth?

To the people who made it?

To the people who used it?

To the people who keep it?

To you?

To a museum?

Using reproductions: Plate – not old how can you tell? ‘cms’ on the back. Compass.

Can take children to the SA museum to see display about the camel drivers.

<http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au>

<http://www.cameleers.net>

Drawing an object does slow down the pace of looking – they have to check details to draw it so this can be useful.

Creative writing – writing about one of the objects without saying its name. Give lots of clues from your research to show which one it is. Other students guess.

Writing the journey of an object – how did it get to Australia etc.

www.rosannehawke.com

Using historical documents eg Diaries – you can see Ernest Giles' *Australia Twice Traversed* at the University of Adelaide e-book site. You can set the historical document into context by using story, drama or objects.

Although Giles wrote these up after the event you can still take a section and teach the concept of 'eye witness account'. They can draw or do class painting of the evidence, or do a TV interview, role play (have cards with names of characters on them), or a stick figure film.

Activities

Story-making (idea from Bage 2000, *Thinking History* p 4-14. (cited in Turner-Bisset). The story of an object is told through the action or materials needed to produce, sell, use, and preserve it (Turner-Bisset, p. 116). E.g. a rug – made at a loom, carried on a camel, taken to a bazaar, bartered for and bought by Taj's father, brought to Australia on the ship. Students may come up with more ideas of what happened to the carpet.

Storytelling – Along with collecting evidence we hear stories about people and events in the past, so research and narrative work together. Storytelling is important in the classroom – it is an ancient form of teaching. We all enjoy story. Telling a story in class is different from reading a story. With storytelling we can have eye contact and more expression: our eyes convey meaning. We can act with movement and gesture. We can invite the children into the world of that character for a while. We can even appear to have audience participation – ask a question for example that doesn't need an answer.

Hearing a story will actively engage the students and they will remember more than in many other activities. Story makes meaning clearer. Plus it will inspire them to find out more. They could re-enact a campfire scene and have students tell the stories from the book or others they have found.

To tell a story, don't learn it by heart; it can be different each time. I do learn the first line though so I don't get stage fright. And I usually learn an ending so I don't waffle on trying to finish. Just make notes of the main events and make the story your own. I tell it to the cat to practice or while driving on country roads.

Role Play – write a script and tell about self, like a monologue, as I did in the beginning. A role play can be written on the basis of evidence the students have gathered.

Hot seating – is an extension of role playing, where the teacher is asked questions about the character. Maybe students who have done research in certain areas, after presenting their evidence in form of a role play, can then be hot seated. Show cards. You can hot seat me if you like. Let's say I've just done the role play piece I did at the beginning and ask questions of me in character.

Music/songs/ drama – these are also with the object to understand the lives of those who used them. I wrote *Taj* to music of 'The Kite Runner', 'Slumdog Millionaire', soundtrack of 'Caravans' and other Indian & Afghan music. The songs I included in *Taj* came from folk song books.

The folk songs can be used in class and students could look for others.

Other Activities Mrs Conway year 6 class from Kapunda Primary School made a camel string. The students each drew a camel and on the back wrote their impressions of the story and what they would like to research.

I spoke at the Readers' Cup in the Adelaide Hills in November 2011. *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* was the focus book and I was amazed at the presentations that each school delivered based on their reading of *Taj*.

Uraidla School performed a rap and wrote a script.

Crafers created a stick figure film about the camels.

Blackwood conducted nineteenth century interviews and wrote a broadsheet to give out to everyone.

East Stirling had a shadow puppet play about the goat race.

Nairne created an alphabet picture book based on *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*.

A Role Play for the character Taj

I am so excited – a little frightened also. I am going on the expedition with Mr Giles at last. I didn't think it would happen: the explorers didn't choose Mustara, my camel. He's not fully grown, only a few years old, but he is so easy to train, as clever as an Afghan mountain lion. Not that I've seen one because I was born here in Beltana, but Padar tells me stories. Actually, he did tell me stories years ago; he doesn't much now, not since my mother left.

So, Emmeline and I tried hard to get Mustara to be strong so he'd keep up with a camel string, taking him out in the desert for a run. In the end he did it all by himself. After the explorers picked 22 camels, Emmeline and I went for a ride in the desert. I was too upset from the explorers not picking Mustara that I didn't notice the strange coloured sky and when we finally saw it, it was too late to head for home. We hid behind Mustara until the sand storm passed over.

Afterwards there was no way we could tell where to go. I couldn't see where the sun was, the air was so heavy with dust and grit. Emmeline is funny. She handed me her hat. She hates that hat but she said we should tie ourselves onto Mustara with her hat ribbons; that's what explorers did she was told. She made me laugh. She can always make me feel better. I said we would use the reins instead. Mustara found the way back to the homestead. Mr Giles was so impressed he said we could join the expedition and Mustara can grow on the way. Mr Giles came to our hut to tell me. His second in charge, Mr Tietkins came too. I am so glad, Praise God. I hated being alone in the hut when Padar went last time with Mr Giles, even though Padar says I'm old enough to look after myself now.

When Mr Giles and Mr Tietkins left, Padar gave me this knife. I know it's special – it came from the old country. So now I've packed my camel bag. I've got a spare shalwar qameez, a tabla. It's not a real one. Padar said tablas are two little drums joined together, but I call this my tabla. I can play a beat with it at least. I hope the explorers won't mind if I join in. Padar says explorers sing songs and tell stories around the camp fire at night just like camel drivers in the old country. I have my own cup and plate. My turban and prayer hat. My rug that Padar gave me. It will be hard to pray at the prescribed times on the way. But Allah is kind to travellers. If we can't stop to pray it will be all right. And Emmeline gave me this blue ribbon. She ripped it off her hat for me to have so I don't forget her.

I can't wait for tomorrow: that's when we will leave before dawn. There is only one thing that I'm sad about. I wish Emmeline could come too.

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