

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Nine: Correspondence Between Cameleers

Gary Watson FRPSV, FRPSL, FACCCofNSW, FBSAP

The land-locked nation of Afghanistan (pronounced “Ahf/yahn/ith/tahn”) would be little known to some readers if it were not for regular news bulletins about the Taliban and random mayhem, which is just the latest chapter from millennia of invasion and internal turmoil. It may surprise you to learn that Afghanistan is larger than France, or that the population exceeds 38,000,000 with a density of 60 per square-kilometre (compared with 36 for the USA and only 3 for Australia). As an aside, Afghanistan is also known for one of the world’s most primitive first stamp issues. [1]

Despite a long and diverse cultural and social history, modern Afghanistan remains the most tribalised country on the planet. This is the result of such factors as deep-rooted social conservatism and the challenging geography that is dominated by a series of roughly east-west mountain ranges that are the western extension of the Himalayas. Movement between the north and south of the country is so difficult and hazardous that it was only in 1964 that the opening of the Russian-built Salang Tunnel through the Hindu Kush mountains provided what is still the only year-round road access between Kabul and the provinces to the north and to the south.

Although Kabul enjoyed prosperity from its proximity to the famed Silk Road trade route between China and Europe, Afghanistan has also ‘enjoyed’ a history of invasion and civil war, coups and assassinations, Machiavellian intrigue and fluid allegiances, a recipe for the political mayhem that exists to the present day.

It is also a history of lost opportunity, such as in the 1890s, when the short-lived reign of Abdur Rahman Khan was marked by a stubborn refusal to allow British and Russian interests to modernise the country by creating railway and telegraph networks between the principal towns.

With this background, imagine the difficulties associated with sending mail from Australia to Afghanistan today, let alone in the early years of the 20th Century. Indeed, our subject cover is the only such pre-World War II cover known to the writer.

Registered at Adelaide, at first glance this appears to be a standard letter to India, and it was sold to me as exactly that. At this time, the overseas letter rate of 2½d was the same for both Empire and non-British destinations, and 3d was the universal registration fee. What the previous owner did not appreciate was the significance of the manuscript endorsements in both English and Farsi, the Arabic script commonly used in parts of Persia, north-western India (now Pakistan) and Afghanistan. [2]

The full address reads, in English, “Dear Mahomed/Kandare/India/via Bombay”, and the flap – see below – tells us that the sender was “Dost Mahomed/PO Woodside/S Australia”, a town in the Adelaide Hills to the east of the ‘City of Churches’. Apparently, the cover was privately carried from Woodside and posted at the General Post Office.

One of the eight cameleers with the ill-fated Burke & Wills



Expedition from Melbourne to Central Australia in 1860 was named “Dost Mahomed”. However, having died about 1885, he was not our sender. It is no surprise to find that other camel-drivers of the same almost-generic name operated in South Australia.

These men, who were variously said to be from India, Baluchistan (a province of what is now Pakistan) or Afghanistan, formed a community at Hergott Springs (from 1917, called Marree) near the junction of the Oodnadatta and Birdsville Tracks where, in the 1860s, they opened the first mosque in Australia, which was also perhaps the most primitive mosque in the world.

Identifying the writer as a ‘Ghan’ has set us on the right track to telling the story of this cover.

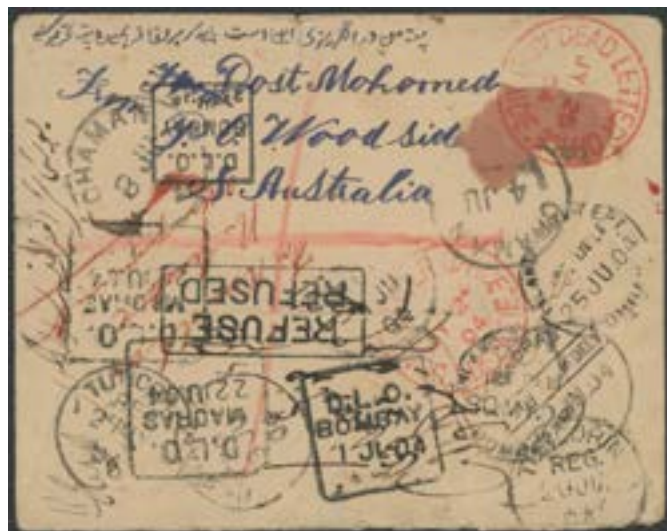


Google “Kandare” and one is overwhelmed by references to German subjects. “Kandare India” is not the name of a locality: instead, you will be introduced to an Indian exponent of mixed martial arts! However, type-in “Kandahar” or “Candhar” and you will be taken straight to Afghanistan. Note that native names are often transcribed into English in a variety of forms. [3]

Kandahar has featured in so many recent news programmes that it is almost as recognisable a name as Kabul, the capital. However,

Kandahar is 500km south-west of Kabul, from which it takes 10½ hours by road, on Highway A1, at an average speed of less than 50km per hour. And that is in 2021!

As noted earlier, Afghanistan has no maritime borders. Mail destined for Kabul 120 years ago, even from Britain, passed through the Indian border town of Peshawar and then through the famed Khyber Pass. However, the evidence here is that letters for Kandahar might enter Afghanistan via Chaman, to which it is much closer than Peshawar.



The reverse of the cover shows that even getting to Chaman was an epic journey. Entry to India was on 27MY/04 at Tuticorin (now Thoothukudi) near India's southern tip and closer to Colombo than Madras (Chennai), to which it was forwarded, arriving 2JU04 after a journey of 500km that oddly took six days. Remarkably, it then raced across India from south-east to north-west, arriving at Chaman – some 2,700km as the crow flies – only two days later(!), a feat that speaks to the speed and efficiency of the railways in British India.

From the frontier border, Kandahar is a further 116km north of Chaman, between which there were no railway or proper road connections. Although the invading British Army operated a post office at Kandahar between 1878 and 1881, the writer has found no evidence of any postal facility there between 1882 and 1904, the year of the cover being reviewed. The absence of a post office is confirmed by the endorsement in red ink at upper-left and repeated on the reverse that states "For Kandahar/no postal/arrangements".

Then there is the suggestion to try "HQ Quetta". (Quetta: site of a famous earthquake in 1935, was the provincial capital, situated 125km SSE of Chaman.) However, those instructions were crossed-through and the absence of any Quetta markings suggests that the letter was still at Chaman (backstamp of 8JU/04) when the direction was changed to "Peshawar", for which there is a faint arrival backstamp of 13JU/04.

Amusingly, to get to Peshawar which is almost 600km north-east of Chaman, the cover would first have had to travel to Quetta anyway!

It is suggested that the indistinct word above the address is "Refused" and that it was added at Peshawar for the reason that

the envelope was denied entry into Afghanistan. This would be consistent with the fact the Afghanistan did not join the Universal Postal Union until 1928, before which time incoming mail was required to bear Afghan domestic postage. Numerous covers from India attest to this fact. And, at least two 1890s covers from England to Kabul are known that each received a boxed handstamp inscribed 'NOT TRANSMISSIBLE/Requires Stamps of P.O. Cabul/for postage beyond Indian frontier'. [4]

It appears that the same postal clerk who wrote "Refused", also added the word "Not" before Peshawar at lower-left, crossed-through the town name and added "Adelaide" at lower-right. The compelling conclusion is that this cover did not enter Afghan territory. Of course, that is not the end of the story.

The next transit backstamp is of Tuticorin on 20JU04 that strongly indicates the letter was missent there, then again forwarded to the nearest Dead Letter Office, at Madras where the boxed 'DLO/ MADRAS/22JU04' datestamp was applied. Then, instead of being shipped back to Australia, for reasons known only to the Indian postal clerks, it was again sent back to Bombay (25JU04), where it was handed to the local Dead Letter Office on the same day.

Then there is a different 'DLO/BOMBAY' backstamp of a week later (1JL04). Based on the intensity of the ink and the quality of the strike, it appears that the boxed 'REFUSE/REFUSED' handstamp was struck there. While that inscription might appear incongruous, it was probably providing confirmation that the Afghans had declined to accept the mail.

Then, after having been apparently missent twice, firstly from Peshawar to Madras instead of to Bombay, and secondly from Madras to Bombay instead of back to South Australia, our much-travelled cover was finally despatched on its way back from whence it came, receiving two strikes of the 'DEAD LETTER OFFICE/ADELAIDE' cds of JY26/04 in rosine ink, one of which ties the brown remnants of what would have been an Indian redirection slip.

There is no evidence that the envelope found its way back to Woodside. As a registered item, it should have been serviced with a Woodside arrival backstamp. Perhaps the postmaster thought there were already too many markings on the cover!

In any event, and most importantly, this marvellous traveller from another era survived for its remarkable story to be revealed 117 years later. Truly, this cover is one of My Favourite Things.

Notes

- [1] Comments about history, geography, population and culture are derived from various online articles from Wikipedia and are provided only as background to this article.
- [2] Friends from Afghanistan have been unable to provide a translation of the Arabic script, which they say is an archaic form. If anyone can assist with even a rough translation of the various endorsements on both sides of the cover, it would be greatly appreciated.
- [3] John Wilkins at page 20 illustrates 1880s Indian-pattern datestamps inscribed 'CANDHAR', 'KANDHAR' and 'KANDAHAR': *Afghanistan 1840-2002 Postal History Handbook* by John Wilkins RFD, published by the Royal Philatelic Society of Victoria (2002). Another alternative spelling is Qandahar.
- [4] Wilkins, at page 25.