

Newsletter

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HISTORY FEATURE

Syrian/Lebanese Traders and the Customs Prosecutions of 1897.

Anne Monsour

We are very privileged to be able to present the full text of Anne Monsour's talk delivered at our Annual General Meeting in October at the Sydney Records Centre:

Before starting, I acknowledge the traditional owners of this site. Secondly, I would like to thank the Australian Lebanese Historical Society for giving me this opportunity to speak. I also want to thank State Records New South Wales for providing the venue here at the Sydney Records Centre. Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the support and encouragement I have received from many people in Sydney. This enthusiasm for my work has often kept me going. In particular, I want to mention Alissar Chidiac and the opportunities provided through the Wattan Project which regrettably has been discontinued.

Of all the factors that influenced the interaction between Syrian/Lebanese immigrants and Australian society, race was the defining factor. Although there is evidence of an ongoing ambiguity regarding their identity, as their visibility increased, the early Syrian/Lebanese were identified as non-white and non-European. While this was important, of more consequence was the fact that Syrian/Lebanese immigrants were officially classified as Asian and were consequently subject to a wide range of institutionalized discrimination. I begin with this because it is within this context that the experience of Syrian/Lebanese traders can be understood.

Firstly, it can be established that in the period 1880 to 1947 the majority of Syrian/Lebanese immigrants were self-employed in trading enterprises such as hawking and shopkeeping. Using information from Queensland naturalization records between 1885 and 1947 (Table 1), with the inclusion of hawking, approximately 80 per cent of the 207 immigrants in the sample of Syrian/Lebanese were self-employed in a trading enterprise. Just over half, 55 per cent were in business in the retail sector as storekeepers, drapers, mercers or general dealers. One quarter (25%) of the immigrants listed hawking as their sole occupation and another nine (4%) combined hawking with storekeeping or farming. In contrast, less than 10 per cent of the sample were employees and it is highly probable a number of these were actually in the employ of another family member. Eleven (5.5%) of the 207 were farmers, another occupation which allowed self-employment. These Queensland findings concur with Jim McKay's finding that in the same period, the majority of Syrian/Lebanese immigrants in New South Wales were also self-employed in some form of private enterprise.¹ Together, the Queensland and New South Wales findings give credence to the stereotypical image of Syrian/Lebanese as traders.

TABLE 1: OCCUPATION OF SYRIAN/LEBANESE IMMIGRANTS IN QUEENSLAND AS LISTED IN FIRST APPLICATION FOR NATURALIZATION (1885-1947)

Occupation	Number	%
Storekeeper	38	18
General Dealer	14	7
Draper or mercer	50	24
Menswear	1	0.5
Grocer	2	1
Fruiterer	1	0.5
Wine Seller	1	0.5
Tailor or dressmaker	3	1.5

¹ Jim McKay, *Phoenician Farewell: Three Generations of Lebanese Christians in Australia* (Melbourne: Ashwood House, 1989), pp. 43-44.

Photographer	1	0.5
Farmer	9	4.5
Farmer & storekeeper	1	0.5
Farmer & hawker	1	0.5
Hawker	51	25
Hawker & storekeeper	7	3
Hawker & draper	1	0.5
Blacksmith	1	0.5
Butcher	1	0.5
Fisherman	1	0.5
Commercial traveller	2	1
Labourer	9	4.5
Shop assistant	7	3
Motor Driver	1	0.5
Priest	1	0.5
Domestic servant	1	0.5
Home duties	1	0.5
Retired	1	0.5
Total	207	100

Source: *Naturalization Files, QSA & NAA (1885-1947)*

To understand the position of Syrian/Lebanese traders in Australia, it is necessary to briefly consider why the majority became petty entrepreneurs? The common explanation attributing this occupational choice to an inherent disposition, particularly to the 'trading instinct of the Phoenician', although attractive, is too simplistic.² However, as they had come from a largely subsistence economy, it is likely most of the immigrants would have had some

² Talcott Williams, 'Introduction', in Philip Hitti, *The Syrians in America* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924), p. vii.

experience of trading in the old country.³ Most importantly, in the 1890s, when Syrian/Lebanese arrived in increasing and therefore noticeable numbers, Australia was experiencing a serious depression, which was exacerbated by a severe drought.⁴ Unemployment was high among skilled workers and even higher amongst the unskilled. The developing labour movement was strongly advocating economic racism.⁵ At the same time, the Australian Federation movement, paralleled by an emerging Australian nationalism which called for an exclusively white and predominately British, Australia, was gaining impetus.⁶ So, despite their small numbers, non-Europeans were perceived as a threat and anti-Chinese legislation was broadened to include all non-Europeans.⁷ These factors led to legislative discrimination in employment that blocked occupational opportunities. Hence, limited choice provides a compelling explanation as to why the majority of Syrian/Lebanese immigrants became self-employed, small traders. Additionally, between 1880 and 1920, big business, which was ethnically English and Scottish, effectively blocked the pathways to commercial success ensuring that 'foreigners' were restricted to petty entrepreneurial activities.⁸ Consequently, the

Chinese became market gardeners, storekeepers and cabinet-makers; the Greeks, cafe proprietors; and the Lebanese and Jews, hawkers, shopkeepers and small manufacturers.⁹ So, Syrian/Lebanese immigrants were able to develop and sustain the occupational pattern of hawking and shopkeeping because they were marginal economic activities that did not directly threaten the employment prospects of white Australians.¹⁰

A final and important explanation as to the predominance of hawking and shopkeeping is that by the early 1890s, a number of Syrian/Lebanese men had established warehouses and factories in Redfern.¹¹ Joseph George Malouf from Zahle arrived in Sydney in 1888. A graduate of the American University in Beirut and with some experience in business, he immediately established himself as a draper and merchant. Malouf's commercial operations were not confined to soft goods. In 1893, he bought a local line of buses; he also became an influential property owner; and by 1909 was the largest owner of oyster leases on the Hawkesbury River. George Dan, also from Zahle, began his business in Redfern in 1890. By 1909, he had a large warehouse, factories and employed over one hundred people. The firm of Stanton Melick Warehousemen, Importers and Manufacturers was founded in 1888. By 1900, the firm was operating both a five-story factory and a warehouse of the same size; employed over one hundred people; and had made investments in property, land and mining in both New South Wales and Queensland. The firm employed travellers in country areas and did business all over

³ Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: South Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 128.

⁴ F. G. Clarke, *Australia: A Concise Political and Social History* (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 158-168.

⁵ Daryl Adair, 'Declarations of Difference: Attempts to Exclude Non-Whites from Late Colonial Australia', *Flinders Journal of History & Politics*, vol. XVI, September 1993, pp.16-26.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See, Ann Curthoys & Andrew Markus, eds, *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia* (Neutral Bay, New South Wales: Hale & Iremonger, 1978); Marie M. de Lepervanche, *Indians in a White Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984); Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations: 1788-1993* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1994).

⁸ Robert Pascoe, *Open for Business: Immigrant and Aboriginal Entrepreneurs Tell Their Story* (Canberra: AGPS, 1990), p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ McKay, *Phoenician Farewell*, p. 39; Janis Wilton, *Immigrants in the Bush: Hawking to Haberdashery*, (Armidale: Multicultural Education Coordinating Committee, New South Wales & Armidale College of Advanced Education, 1897), pp. 8 & 46-47.

¹¹ The following biographical information about Joseph G. Malouf, Stanton Melick, George Dan, Anthony Coorey and Naser Abdullah is from *Souvenir to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Municipality of Redfern 1859-1909* (Sydney: McBarron, Stewart, & Co., 1909).

Australia. Anthony Coorey, who arrived from Kfarsghab in 1891, set up a successful business in Redfern that included a modern clothing factory. His brother, Simon Coorey, established a branch of the business in Ruthven Street, Toowoomba. After twelve years of partnership with Stanton Mellick, Naser Abdullah, from the village of Kousba, set up his own warehouse in Elizabeth Street, Redfern, and later a branch store in Wollongong.

According to McKay, this group, which also included the Lahoods and Hannas, developed a 'near monopoly on incoming Syrian Labour', and it was because of these 'economic gatekeepers' in Redfern that almost all Syrian/Lebanese immigrants took up hawking as their first occupation.¹² New arrivals were taught the fundamentals of hawking, given goods on credit and a railway ticket to a country area.¹³ Even when they had raised enough capital to open a shop, they still relied on the Redfern Syrians for their goods.¹⁴ Both anecdotal and archival evidence verify that the influence of the Redfern warehousemen was enduring and extended as far north as Cairns and Townsville. This connection is confirmed, for example, by the list of creditors in liquidation files. When Michael Brothers Drapers, Townsville, went into liquidation in 1902, the firm of Stanton Mellick was a significant creditor.¹⁵ The presence of names such as A. & S. Coorey, Joseph Hanna, S. Mellick and George Dan, in the lists of creditors in the liquidation files of four Syrian/Lebanese businesses in North Queensland in 1913 and 1914, further illustrates the persistent influence of the Redfern warehouses.¹⁶

The Customs prosecutions against several Syrian/Lebanese shopkeepers and hawkers throughout Queensland (Brisbane, Toowoomba, Warwick, Rockhampton and Townsville) between 1895 and 1904, also demonstrate the strong links with the Redfern warehouses. Joseph Lahood confirmed, for example, that the goods being held in the Brisbane Customs House had come from his firm.¹⁷ Evidence given in the cases against five Syrian/Lebanese in Rockhampton in 1897 shows that Stanton Mellick and Naser Abdullah were important suppliers for the hawkers and shopkeepers in that district.¹⁸ Indeed, Aziz Mellick went to Rockhampton for the court hearings.¹⁹ A case of fancy goods seized from Michael George of Toowoomba in 1900 had come from the firm Anthony Coorey & Brother, Redfern.²⁰ As the Customs charges were specifically related to goods imported from the Syrian warehouses, it was, in fact, entirely due to this connection that the prosecutions occurred.

The identification of Syrian/Lebanese with hawking and shopkeeping led to an enduring view that they did not engage in productive or honest labour.²¹ By 1892, the visible participation of Syrian women in hawking had led to speculation that Syrian men were 'lazy', 'selfish' and willing to live upon the 'energy and labor of their wives'.²² In 1906, the Sydney Bulletin claimed Syrian men would 'do nothing involving any physical exertion', preferring instead 'to lounge lazily all day behind a counter, bargaining volubly over each sale'.²³ As inveterate price cutters, Syrian traders were scathingly, portrayed as being devoid of any commercial morality:

¹² McKay, *Phoenician Farewell*, pp. 41-42.

¹³ For a first hand account of how new arrivals were prepared for the road see Joe Hanna's recollections in Wilton, *Immigrants in the Bush*, pp. 8 & 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁵ Audit Liquidation, Box 3, Number 2 of 1902, TR 1121/12, QSA.

¹⁶ Audit Liquidation, Box 8, Numbers 3, 4, 13 & 11 of 1913, TR 1121/12, QSA.

¹⁷ Joseph Lahood, *The King v Joseph Lahood* 1900-1, 8 November 1900, CRS/307, QSA.

¹⁸ *Capricornian*, 27 February 1897, pp. 33-35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Collector of Customs to Under Secretary, Treasury, 3887, 28 May 1900, CRS/263, QSA.

²¹ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, vol. 14, 9 July 1903, p. 1939.

²² *Illustrated Sydney News*, 19 November 1892, p. 4.

²³ *Bulletin*, 18 January 1906, p.7.

*The Syrian type is a sordid one, and its ideal is money; in pursuit of that object it is patient and tenacious, sometimes blustering, sometimes cringing, but usually a liar devoid of shame. The Syrian is a man who does not, and never will, do any useful or productive work, but will always remain what he now is — a parasite and a drone.*²⁴

In 1914, Atlee Hunt, advised the Minister for External Affairs against the unrestricted admission of Syrians because 'they hardly ever engage in the producing industries'.²⁵ Much later, in 1928, Alexander Alam (MLC) was told it was a matter of concern that 'a large number' of recent Syrian/Lebanese immigrants were 'of the poorer type', and that many had been 'employed merely as hawkers' and were therefore of little use to the Commonwealth.²⁶

A reason this racial stereotyping in regards to occupation was possible is that hawking and shopkeeping gave Syrian/Lebanese a public visibility, brought them into direct contact with the police and, at times, led to trouble with the law. Any breaches of the law were reported in newspapers, inevitably contributing to a negative image of Syrian/Lebanese traders. The most common offence was probably hawking without a licence. However, in the late 1890s, it was charges for defrauding customs that generated the most publicity and authenticated a negative image of Syrian/Lebanese traders.

Early in 1897, Customs officials in Brisbane raided the South Brisbane stores of at least six Syrians. Subsequently, three of the Syrian storekeepers were fined £1,000 for undervaluing goods, and three other cases (Abraham Craitem, Calile Hannousch and

Michael Toomey) went to court.²⁷ The fine payment was the result of an out-of-court settlement between the Collector of Customs, the Treasury and the three Syrian storekeepers.²⁸ According to the Collector of Customs, the practice of defrauding the revenue by bringing dutiable goods into the colony under fictitious invoices and a general system of undervaluation was becoming very prevalent amongst Syrians and more seizures were anticipated.²⁹ News of the fraudulent behaviour of Syrian/Lebanese spread throughout Queensland. In Warwick, readers were told Syrians had been defrauding Customs for at least fifteen months, that they habitually cheated Customs in every Queensland port, and that 'a good many Sydney firms' were supplying fictitious invoices.³⁰ On the same day, the *Bundaberg Mail* included an article that referred to 'the nest of invoice-salting Syrians in Stanley-street'.³¹ Later that month, a scathing article in the *Worker* referred to the £1,000 fine and pointedly asked:

*Where did these people get the wherewithal to pay the fines? We are informed that reputable wholesale houses assisted them. What do the retailers think of this? Does it look like keeping Australia for the white men? We regard it as but another phase of "commercial morality" which not only permits wholesale firms to create white slaves, but carries the principle of sweating to an extent which allows the Syrians to grow fat on the life's blood of the white retailer.*³²

Demonstrating that they were targeting Syrian traders statewide, Customs authorities followed up their Brisbane action by raiding Syrian/Lebanese storekeepers and hawkers in Rockhampton and Townsville. According to the *Brisbane Courier*, the authorities were 'acting under a plan of operations which had been

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Atlee Hunt, Memorandum for Minister, Department of External Affairs, 20363, 27 October 1914, A1/1, 14/20363, NAA (ACT).

²⁶ Home & Territories Department to Alexander Alam, MLC, 28/198, 12 January 1928, A1/1, 14/20363, NAA (ACT). In 1925, Alexander Alam became the first Syrian/Lebanese Australian to enter parliament, see McKay, *Phoenician Farewell*, p. 64.

²⁷ *Maryborough Chronicle*, 5 February 1897; *Bundaberg Mail*, 5 February 1897.

²⁸ *Brisbane Courier*, 6 February 1897, p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 10 February 1897.

³¹ *Bundaberg Mail*, 10 February 1897.

³² *Worker*, 20 February 1897, p. 2.

carefully mapped out for some time'.³³ In Rockhampton, Customs raided 'all the Syrian places of business with one exception', while in Townsville, they acted against three Syrian storekeepers including Moses Bros and Michael Bros.³⁴ In Rockhampton, fourteen Syrian/Lebanese shopkeepers and hawkers were investigated for breaches of the Customs Duties Act.³⁵ Five, Anthony John Mellick, Abraham Nazer, George Wahby, Elias Wahby and Joseph Koorey, were subsequently charged with using falsified invoices.³⁶ Four of the five cases were dropped. One storekeeper was convicted and fined £52.2.8 plus costs.³⁷ For Anthony Mellick, the penalty for breaching the Customs Act may have gone beyond paying the fine. As would be expected, when he applied for naturalization in 1902, this conviction was noted in the police report.³⁸ Despite being described as 'a respectable citizen', his application was unsuccessful.³⁹

Colonial Customs officials continued to pursue Syrian/Lebanese traders until Australia became a free trade zone when the colonies federated. The outstanding cases against Syrians in Brisbane were heard later in 1897. Then in 1899 and 1900, several Syrians in Warwick and Toowoomba were charged with customs fraud.⁴⁰ These included Michael George, Joseph Budway, Yarrad Abraham, Assad Abraham, Mary Abood, George Sabat and Abraham Abood, and the goods in question were from the following Syrian firms: Anthony Coorey & Brother, Massoud Maree, J. T Malouf, Malouf & Co., and Malouf & Zaloum.

³³ *Brisbane Courier*, 13 February 1897, p. 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Brisbane Courier*, 18 February 1897, p. 5.

³⁶ *Capricornian*, 27 February 1897, pp. 33-35 & 6 March 1897, pp. 32-36.

³⁷ *Capricornian*, 6 March 1897, p. 35.

³⁸ Anthony Mellick, Naturalization Application, 27 May 1902, Col/73(a), QSA.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Briefs and Associated Papers Relating to the Prosecution of Certain Syrian Residents for Breaches of the Customs Duties Act of 1888, CRS/263, QSA.

The Customs operation was extensive and thorough, and targeted hawkers as well as storekeepers. The raids by Customs authorities were very public. In a report on the Rockhampton raids, it was noted, for example, that:

*Nearly all day yesterday vans were employed by the customs authorities in removing the goods from the shops to the Queen's warehouse..., the transfers being watched with interest and amusement by a crowd of spectators.*⁴¹

Furthermore:

*The seizures were not confined to the business places alone, for in one private dwelling occupied by Syrians...a valuable haul was made.*⁴²

Evidence given in the Rockhampton court cases confirms Customs Authorities were targeting Syrian/Lebanese traders. Since July 1895, for example, it had been 'the usual practice' at the Rockhampton port 'to add fifteen per cent on all goods imported by Syrians from Syrian houses'.⁴³ Mr. Fahey, the Sub-Collector of Customs, added the fifteen per cent because he believed the goods were undervalued.⁴⁴ According to William Gregg, a clerk, 'the Customs officers were particularly careful about the invoices of Syrians'.⁴⁵ William Bradford, who was second in charge of Customs at Rockhampton, agreed that 'the Customs officers were particularly careful with regard to goods imported by Syrians'.⁴⁶ Section 5 of the Customs Duties Act of 1888 allowed the Sub-Collector of Customs to assess the value of the goods and to fix the duty accordingly.⁴⁷ Therefore, the Sub-Collector of Customs was acting within his powers when he added fifteen per cent to the Syrians' invoices.

⁴¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 13 February 1897, p. 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Capricornian*, 6 March 1897, p. 33.

⁴⁴ *Queenslander*, 27 February 1897, p. 447.

⁴⁵ *Capricornian*, 27 February 1897, p. 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

However, the practice of treating Syrian importers as a group and not as individuals was, conceivably, unjust and discriminatory. According to his own evidence, Mr Fahey had previously decided some Europeans were undervaluing goods and had added a percentage to their invoices.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, this had not resulted in the same action being taken against all subsequent European importers. Indeed, some contemporaries criticised the collective treatment of Syrians by Customs officials in Rockhampton. George Shaw, a Customs House agent, for example, claimed he had told Mr Fahey that adding the extra per cent was unfair:

*...because he believed the Syrians were straight men; if he had thought the invoices were incorrect he would not have accepted them; he always found the Syrians were very straight men....*⁴⁹

Similarly, Robert Harvey-Allen, another Customs House agent, said he had 'frequently protested' against the fifteen per cent being added on.⁵⁰ However although 'he spoke to Mr. Fahey' and also 'to Bradford and Moran', 'they refused to take off the fifteen per cent'.⁵¹

In a letter to the Collector of Customs regarding the investigation of four Syrian storekeepers at Toowoomba, Inspector Gabriel referred to an 'extensive', 'system of frauds carried on by these Syrians', and outlined what he considered to be 'their modus "operandi"'.⁵² According to Gabriel:

They first purchase their goods from wholesale houses in Sydney; these goods are then sent to fellow countrymen residing in

Sydney who re-invoice the same goods to Brisbane at lower values...⁵³

To provide evidence against the Syrians, an experienced fancy-goods trader was sent to Sydney to investigate the operations of all the Syrian/Lebanese traders in Elizabeth Street, Redfern.⁵⁴ This on-site investigation was considered necessary because 'experience' had shown 'these people' were 'prepared to assist each other with verbal and documentary evidence — regardless of the facts'.⁵⁵ According to the investigator, 'the documents usually presented by the Assyrian traders' were 'not the genuine invoices'.⁵⁶ In his report to the Collector of Customs, the investigator portrayed Syrian/Lebanese traders as the alien 'other', totally incapable of doing business honestly:

The total amount of undervaluation is not proportionately great owing probably to the recent prosecutions being still fresh in mind yet the inclination to defraud seems to be too strong to be resisted. Some goods are correctly charged others are slightly altered and a few grossly undervalued altogether... [I]t is hard for Europeans to understand the foolishness of risking so much for such little gain. Evidently their commercial morality is not of a high standard and they probably consider that by charging some goods correctly others will be allowed to pass unnoticed.⁵⁷

Syrian/Lebanese were being accused of three breaches of Customs regulations. It was alleged they were undervaluing goods for the purpose of paying customs, using false invoices, and bringing in goods that were not invoiced. If goods were being undervalued, it was being done by the warehouses. What did they have to gain by doing this? Were they

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Capricornian*, 6 March 1897, p. 33.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Inspector Gabriel to Collector of Customs, 3084, 4 June 1900, Briefs and Associated Papers relating to the Prosecution of Certain Syrian Residents for Breaches of the Customs Duties Act of 1888, CRS/263, QSA.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Crown Solicitor, Briefs & Associated Papers in the Case *The King v Joseph Lahood*, 1900-1, pp. 19-22, CRS/307, QSA.

⁵⁵ C. S. V. Millengen to Collector of Customs, 27 September 1900, p. 20, CRS/307, QSA.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

charging one price and recording another? Why continue the practice after some Syrian/Lebanese traders in Queensland had been heavily fined? Was it so difficult to make a living that the risk of being caught was worth it? Sometimes, the Sydney warehouses included goods which had not been ordered as a way of shifting stock that wasn't selling. This could explain why some goods were not invoiced. The evidence in the court cases relied on expert witnesses assessing the value of the goods. However, prices and the quality of goods were variable, and the Sydney warehouses also dealt in liquidated stock.⁵⁸ The warehouses did supply two invoices, one in English and one in Arabic. According to the Syrian/Lebanese traders, prices on the Arabic invoices were higher because they showed them the selling price. Robert Harvey-Allen, a Customs House agent in Rockhampton, accepted this as a reasonable explanation:

...he understood the values in the Arabic invoice were higher than those in the English invoice; he believed the Arabic invoice was written to let the importer know what the actual cost was, inclusive of charges; the charges consisted of duty, freight, wharfage, harbour dues, cartage, and other expenses in connection with importing; the Arabic invoice would show the price the importer must sell at in order to make a profit; that was done frequently in Rockhampton with other business houses; especially in regard to foreign invoices from America and Germany; he had done it himself to show the importer the price he must sell at....⁵⁹

However, the Customs authorities believed the English invoice was deliberately undervalued to decrease duty payments. It is possible that Syrian/Lebanese traders were acting fraudulently. However, it is also possible they were targeted because the relationship between the Syrian/Lebanese warehouses and Syrian/Lebanese hawkers and shopkeepers was vertically integrated and hence, was an almost exclusively non-European enterprise. Clearly, the Customs

⁵⁸ *Capricornian*, 6 March 1897, p. 33.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

prosecution cases raise many issues about early Syrian/Lebanese trading practices that require further research. Certainly, the trading practices of the Sydney-based, Syrian/Lebanese warehouses warrant further investigation.



The Pot Calling the Kettle Black
The Worker, May 8 1897

Text Reads: For some time past the Syrian population of South Brisbane has not been on the best of terms. Affairs were reported to have reached a climax over the Custom-house prosecutions and in consequence seven informations which were laid charging a like-number of Syrians conspiring to agree to murder one George Khyatt, the police this afternoon effected seven arrests, the prisoners being safely lodged in the lock-up. Khyatt was a witness for the Crown yesterday in the police court in a case where a countryman was prosecuted for evading Customs duties. The arrest created considerable excitement among the Syrians.

Whether the close scrutiny of Syrian/Lebanese by Customs officials was justified or not, the publicity generated by the cases tarred all Syrians with the same brush. While some newspapers, such as the *Brisbane Courier* and the *Queenslander* provided relatively straightforward reports, the language and content of others focused on the dishonesty of Syrian/Lebanese in their dealings with Customs and emphasised their status as outsiders. A cartoon in the *Worker*, depicting Syrians fighting Chinese and titled 'The pot calling the kettle black', clearly insinuated Syrians, like the Chinese, were alien and undesirable.⁶⁰ An article in the *Bundaberg Mail* referred to the 'swarthy-skinned hawkers' and

⁶⁰ *Worker*, 8 May 1897, p. 4.

'the swarthy ones'.⁶¹ The *Worker* claimed cases involving Syrians or 'yellow-skins' were keeping the South Brisbane Magistrate in a job and speculated about the cost to 'the white taxpayer' of 'supervising these aliens'.⁶² Keeping the story alive, in June 1897, the *Bundaberg Mail* followed up a May article with the following report:

*I see the New Zealanders have followed our lead by raiding the Syrians. Hunting up invoice-salters is the latest device to raise the wind. Now that our City Fathers are in the right humour about adorning Brisbane with statues, I would suggest one to Khyatt, the Syrian who first "blew the gaff" on his countrymen and their little game. The New Zealanders reckon the few Syrians arrested in Auckland alone diddled the Customs to the tune of 30,000 [pounds] or 40,000 [pounds]. Certainly, New Zealand, if not all of the rest of Australasia, should subscribe to that statue.*⁶³

As well as generating bad publicity, the concerted enforcement of the Customs Duties Act in relation to Syrian/Lebanese traders affected both the livelihood and privacy of individuals and their families. Customs officers entered shops and homes. In one of the Rockhampton raids, the Customs officers broke in when they found the shop locked and no-one there.⁶⁴ Julia Mellick, the wife of one of the Syrian/Lebanese charged in Rockhampton, told the court how Customs had left a man on guard in her shop:

*...when they returned she saw one man in her shop;...this man stopped till seven o'clock, when another man came and slept there; the red-whiskered man came next day with Mr Gabriel; Mr Gabriel said he would take the goods after dinner; Gabriel, Woodroffe and the other man stood on the counter and handed the goods to the witness;....*⁶⁵

Customs officers seized goods from hotel rooms, shops, ports and railway stations.

⁶¹ *Bundaberg Mail*, 26 May 1897.

⁶² *Worker*, 29 May 1897, p. 2.

⁶³ *Bundaberg Mail*, 2 June 1897.

⁶⁴ *Capricornian*, 6 March 1897, p. 34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Goods seized were stored until charges were laid often weeks or even months later. The seizure of stock inevitably hindered business and threatened the livelihood of these small traders. In January 1897, for example, solicitors for Michael Toomey, a Syrian/Lebanese storekeeper in South Brisbane, noted in a letter to the Crown Solicitor, that Customs had seized 'practically the whole' of their clients trading stock.⁶⁶ Counsel for Abraham Nazer, a Syrian/Lebanese hawker in the Rockhampton district, claimed the seizure of all the defendant's stock bordered 'very close to persecution'.⁶⁷ In his final address in the Anthony Mellick case, Mr Lilly, counsel for the defence, argued that Mr Fahey, the Sub-collector of Customs for the Port of Rockhampton had:

*...placed a lot of people in a very serious position, indeed. These men (Syrians) have been given credit by a large number of people, and through Mr Fahey's actions they have been greatly inconvenienced. The Customs swooped down on them and took everything belonging to them, inflicting great hardship on them.*⁶⁸

Similarly, in June 1900, Charles Hennessy, the solicitor representing Syrian/Lebanese traders from Toowoomba, made the following observation:

*The seizures were made here on the 22nd and 23rd May last, and the businesses of my clients are at a stand still pending the result of the actions.*⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Morris & Fletcher to Crown Solicitor, 23 January 1897, Briefs and Associated Papers in Cases involving the Collector of Customs, Customs v Toomey, CRS/262, QSA.

⁶⁷ *Capricornian*, 6 March 1897, p. 33.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁹ Charles Hennessy to Crown Solicitor, 3001, 19 June 1900, Briefs and Associated Papers relating to the Prosecution of Certain Syrian Residents for Breaches of the Customs Duties Act of 1888, CRS/263, QSA.



WILL THE DOOR BE SHUT IN TIME?

The Worker, May 22nd 1897.

Hennessy requested that the Crown Solicitor speed up the proceedings. As their shops had been closed since the seizures, his clients had effectively been put out of business.⁷⁰ Undoubtedly, this state of affairs would have pleased the European retailers who resented the presence of non-European traders.

Not only did the ongoing raids and charges of customs fraud disrupt businesses and damage reputations, they also caused a serious rift between Syrian/Lebanese, particularly in South Brisbane. In May 1897, seven Syrians, Calile Hannoush, Assad Farrah, Batras Cutter, Joseph Warby, Joseph Farrid, Salem Mahboob and Abraham Craitem, were charged with conspiring to murder, George Khyatt, the Syrian informer believed to have prompted the Customs investigations.⁷¹ The situation was serious enough for the representative of the Turkish Government in Australia, Abraham Khaled, to come from Melbourne to help settle the dispute.⁷² Later, in May, the principal

witnesses for the prosecution in the conspiracy to murder case, Eli Dahur and Aspar Frangi were charged with perjury.⁷³ Although both cases were dismissed, as the following account relates, the damage had already been done:

As far as the Syrians are concerned they have been stirring themselves up. First came the information from certain of the swarthy ones which led to the conviction of others of invoice salting. Indictment for conspiring to murder followed. Then abusive language, then a charge of perjury - and all arising from the information aforesaid. Thus falling out among themselves the Syrians are losing all their natural advantages, and might as well be white men.⁷⁴

Early Syrian/Lebanese traders in Queensland were identified as a non-white, non-European, minority group whose business methods were dubious. Unwelcome, they were attributed a range of undesirable characteristics, and Europeans actively opposed their presence. However, the disparagement of Syrian/Lebanese traders must be seen in the light of moves in the late 1890s to introduce a White Australia policy in the colonies, and its successful introduction by the Commonwealth in 1901.⁷⁵ In this context, any non-white group was targeted as a menace, and merchants were in some ways more vulnerable because they were bound by government regulations and depended on the goodwill of their customers. It may be that the close scrutiny of Syrian/Lebanese traders by Customs officials was justified. However, the subsequent publicity encouraged the racialization of the alleged offences, hence emphasising the outsider status of Syrian/Lebanese and tarnishing the reputation of all Syrians.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1897, p. 2.

⁷⁴ *Bundaberg Mail*, 26 May 1897.

⁷⁵ Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850-1901* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979); A. T. Yarwood and M. J. Knowling, *Race Relations in Australia: A History* (North Ryde, NSW: Methuen, 1982); Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations 1788-1993* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 1 May 1897, p. 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7 May 1897, p. 2.