

Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire

by Jane Lydon

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In her latest book, *Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire*, Jane Lydon invites the reader to think afresh about Australia's colonial legacy and the images that have been used to tell those stories. Readers familiar with her earlier books, especially *The Flash of Recognition* (2012), will recognise Lydon's sustained interest in making use of prints, especially photographs, to ask curly questions about Australian history. In the past, Lydon has sought to understand Indigenous perspectives by working closely with community groups as they identify and interpret historical photographs. In this book, earlier research is deepened by burrowing into archives both in Australia and abroad (the United Kingdom, Italy, France, United States) to demonstrate similarities in colonial and imperial modes of thinking around the world. Images that have been used to define Aboriginal culture and reinforce mainstream Australian histories are lifted out of microhistories of people and places into far-reaching global networks of repositories and ideas.

Central to the ideas Lydon explores is the golden and hopeful thread of humanitarianism, even within recognisable colonial typologies. Her theoretical trajectory goes back to Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), with his idea that 'moral conduct' is grounded in 'the experience of seeing and being seen' (p. 4). Mindful that not all attempts to elicit 'fellow-feeling' or empathy are successful, Lydon carefully selects for our consideration projects often driven by humanitarian activism that are picked up in literature and the popular press.

Methodologically, her book is a series of roughly chronological case studies where discreet visual archives are examined through comparable literary tropes and newspaper and government reports.

Much of Lydon's argument concerns the affective qualities of humanitarian images informed by personal encounters and disseminated in order to challenge prevailing social Darwinist theories. Far from endorsing contemporary assumptions of (racial) difference and later interpretations of (missionary) coercion, formal portraits from the 1860s of overdressed Aboriginal Christians at the Poonindie mission are shown by Lydon to have initially demonstrated the sitters' 'essential humanity and equality' (p. 37).

Images, and especially the assumed veracity of photographs, can help in the reconstruction of history. But, as Lydon well knows, the absence of photographs that might have validated Aboriginal testimonials of massacres can no longer be the excuse to whitewash history. Lydon tackles the problem in two ways. First, she alludes to comparable atrocity images from around the globe to remind the reader of what is missing within the Australian archives. Second, she looks at other visual media, illustrations and maps, especially those sourced in Arthur Vogan's reportage novel *The Black Police: A Story of Modern Australia* (1890). Whereas Vogan's 'Slave Map of Modern Australia' (where enslaved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples occupied territories roughly akin to the areas north of the so-called Rowley Line) drew attention to abuses across large tracts of Australia's hinterland, out of sight of white settlements in the south-east, a very recent (5 July 2017) map by the University of Newcastle corrects the history by pinpointing dozens of sites of 'Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia 1788–1872'.¹ Brutality was everywhere. Lydon may be correct in observing that the 'absence of atrocity photography' meant that all too often accounts of massacres 'lacked the force of proof' (p. 76): sentimental or lurid reconstructions arouse suspicions in us all. But as inheritors of the insights of Barthes, Sontag, Tagg and Sekula, we all know that claims for photographic 'proof' are often deeply flawed and always up for question. Although it was not in her remit to do so, I think it's worth acknowledging that in recent decades many Indigenous and also some non-Indigenous artists have tackled the hushed-up legacy of massacres, massacre sites, deaths from nuclear testing and deaths in police custody. Their profound works and installations are a far cry from lurid illustrations used over 100 years ago by Vogan, and suggest the extent to which themes of colonial brutality, culture and memory have impacted on the personal and collective psyche. They expand the idea of 'proof'.

Critical readings of Australia's photographic archive, especially as it relates to representations of Australia's First Nation peoples, can be traced through a steady stream of exhibitions and literature from the early 1980s. But whereas so much of this literature sought to expand the critique from its colonial and ethnographic base

1 C.D. Rowley's map of the 'Distribution of Aboriginal Population (Census 1961)' was published in Rowley 1970, 1971. The 'Massacre Map' can be found at c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php (accessed 28 July 2017).

to broader disciplinary and theoretical discourses, Lydon's quite consistent goals have been to understand why the images were taken in the first place and how they have been used over time.

The occasional blooper, such as '1838' for 1938 as the year of the first Day of Mourning and Protest (p. 117) does not detract from the overall impression that Lydon's book is rigorous, impassioned, imaginative and compelling. Hers is no crude attack on colonial cruelties, but a more nuanced weighing up of not always uncompromised efforts by some observers to both acknowledge a shared humanity and name atrocities that were grossly under-reported before the law and in the press.

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