

Mistress of Everything: Queen Victoria in Indigenous Worlds

edited by Sarah Carter and Maria Nugent

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Review by Heather Goodall
University of Technology Sydney

Queen Victoria was an important symbol for the officials of the British Empire, who frequently commented on the loyalty, tribute and expressions of affection sent to the Queen by the people of England's many colonies. And, indeed, there were many such messages, gifts and deputations. Yet their meanings were very different for the senders – those colonised people who were trying to negotiate the rapidly changing political and economic conditions they were facing as the British imposed control on their homes.

In *Mistress of Everything: Queen Victoria in Indigenous Worlds*, Sarah Carter and Maria Nugent bring us a rich and stimulating feast of close studies from four colonies of the Queen: South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. In each of these, colonised peoples who were not of Anglo descent were confronted with the proposition that they must now pledge allegiance to a distant monarch.

In some ways, this was a historically specific interaction. It made a difference that the impact of the heaviest confrontation with the British for many colonised peoples was during the reign of a particular monarch who was, firstly, a woman – which called into play the gender orders both of the colonised cultures and that of Britain itself – and, secondly, that Victoria aged through the long years of her reign – at first unmarried, then marrying, producing children, being widowed and living to an old age – all of which mobilised the cultural tropes about the status of various ages and marital states in all of those cultures.

In other ways, this was a variation on a longer-established set of strategies. Appealing to monarchs over the heads of local authorities had, after all, been a common practice in England through medieval times and it had also been so in places like India before colonisation by the British. But, in the time of Victoria, it was complicated not only along the cultural lines of gender and age, but also by the pressures of escalating capitalist extraction and imperial military force.

So the responses of colonised, non-Anglo peoples are an important source for historians, but not for naïve and quaint native expressions of loyalty to their colonisers. Instead, as the authors in this volume show us, they are sources for insight into colonised peoples' strategies for responding to, appropriating, manipulating and challenging the claims to sovereignty made by the British through the person and symbol of Queen Victoria. One heir of British colonialism, the Commonwealth of Australia, is currently being made very aware of the continuing Indigenous challenge to and engagement with this idea of 'sovereignty', and this book should play an important role in the discussions. In their Introduction to the volume, Sarah Carter and Maria Nugent have written an insightful and extremely valuable comparative analysis of the diverse case studies they have gathered. As they point out, 'our authors are all in agreement that Indigenous expressions of loyalty unsettle the self-serving settler myth of unstinting adulation of Indigenous people for the British sovereign' (p. 7).

There are many important chapters in this book. One of its innovations is to include Barbara Caine's careful study of the actual attitudes that Queen Victoria herself displayed and the personal interactions with colonised people – mostly the displaced royal ones – that she initiated and pursued. Caine's chapter makes it clear that the personality of Victoria, her ageing process and her gender opened up many possibilities in responses to her – as well as to the British regime – that would have been very different in another person, with a shorter reign and if the sovereign had been male.

Another of the book's important innovations is to draw its authors and focal case studies from across the British Empire during Victoria's long reign. The opportunity to look not only to what are now well-trodden comparative pathways to other 'settler' colonies like New Zealand and Canada but also to the far more ethnically complex colonial situations of southern Africa are valuable in allowing us to identify what themes were generated from the empire – or from Victoria herself – and what arose from local conditions, cultures and demands. Hilary Sapire's chapter on African expressions of loyalty to Victoria and her son Alfred in 1860 is a model of careful, detailed empirical data, which is nevertheless lucid and accessible in its nuanced analysis of what 'loyalty' meant to very different individuals among the Xhosa, whom the British at that stage assumed to be all thoroughly defeated and compliant. The depth and care of Sapire's chapter is echoed in that of Carter on Canada, Belgrave on New Zealand and Nugent on south-eastern Australia.

Not only do these chapters offer us a chance to consider colonised people outside those in ‘settler colonies’, but they offer important insights into the wide variety of ways that attitudes to Queen Victoria were expressed within Australia. Comparing Maria Nugent on eastern New South Wales and Penelope Edmonds on western Victoria, for example, allows important glimpses of Indigenous responses to Queen Victoria not only in different areas but over different times, including very current reinterpretations of beliefs about Victoria’s personal gifting of land and of submission to the sovereign. These two authors point to the range of expressions that need to be considered on both sides. Edmonds points to material culture, noting Aboriginal responses to the colonial stamp of the sovereign’s profile on ‘sovereigns’ of coinage as well as commemorative medals, and compares this to contemporary artists’ challenging substitutions of Indigenous women’s profiles in similar situations. This theme of material expressions is taken up powerfully in other chapters, like Amanda Nettelbeck’s work in Canada as well as Australia and Miranda Johnson on portraiture in New Zealand.

In all of these and many other chapters, authors explore the recognition that sovereignty is performed – on both sides. Colonised peoples undertook symbolic acts of ceremonial gift giving and formal submissions to convey loyalty but at the same time to advance strategic goals. The empire too – and indeed the Queen herself – used performative modes frequently to convey both superiority and power through the clearly gendered mythology of royal maternal care for colonised peoples. The performed messages of the colonised peoples described in these chapters from all four colonies were carefully crafted to negotiate as well as to communicate, and it has been this multifaceted and continually changing use of performance, words, images and material culture that has offered such an important means of recalling and critiquing empire.

In its innovations and the depth of each of its contributions, this volume will act as a beginning. The editors have brought together an exciting collection of papers, which separately and together will stimulate many more conversations across national and racial borders. They have taken us outside the ghetto of ‘settler colonialism’ to explore colonised peoples’ responses to their colonisation far more widely and realistically than is often possible. We are in a far stronger position to see the ways empires and sovereigns make their claims, how gender and power intersect and how colonised peoples’ challenges to those claims have taken shape in a range of conditions and different media, all of which have changed over time.

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