

The Contest for Aboriginal Souls: European Missionary Agendas in Australia

by Regina Ganter

xxxii + 248 pp., ANU Press, 2018,
ISBN: 9781760462048 (pbk), \$50.00

Review by Tim Rowse
The Australian National University

In the colonisation of Australia, non-state authorities did much of the colonising, and among the most important agents of colonial authority were missionaries. Regina Ganter has condensed years of archival research on the history of missions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – across an impressive number of archives in Australia and Europe – into a deceptively short book that sits alongside her voluminous website hosted by Griffith University.¹ The book is complementary to the website, but stands well on its own.

To describe the entry of missions into Aboriginal domains, Ganter reaches for an organic metaphor: ‘grafting on to local societies’ (p. 107). In choosing a word that refers to a sympathetic relationship between two organisms, she concedes something to the view that missionaries had of themselves. As she writes:

missionaries thought of themselves as guardians against the worst excesses of colonisation, rather than as colonisers themselves, and [they] were often amazed when Indigenous people treated them as just one of the ‘bosses’ (p. 208).

As she points out, some grafts did not ‘take’. The average duration of a mission in Australia up until 1915 was only 14 years. This was also the average lifespan of the 35 missions that were staffed by German speakers over the full course of colonial Australian history. There were many missions of short duration. All missions have

1 ‘German Missionaries in Australia’, missionaries.griffith.edu.au (accessed 18 December 2018).

been fragile, difficult projects, and Regina concludes that ‘eventually, the missionaries had to either adapt to local expectations, interpretations and rituals to involve locals, or quit’ (p. 146).

So the puzzle at the centre of her work is the puzzle of two cultures’ sustainable coexistence in a settler-colonial society. Ganter illuminates this by pointing to the ways that missions were materially useful and spiritually intelligible to many Indigenous Australians. Her evidence about this ‘middle ground’ is so extensive and so convincing that a reader might ponder the book’s title: ‘The Contest for Aboriginal Souls’. The word ‘contest’ refers more to the territorial rivalries among the Christian denominations – covered in her first three chapters – than to any zero-sum tussle between Christian and Indigenous spirituality. While Ganter persistently returns to the question of how missions could be sites of sustained coexistence and even of community, she also sees the gaps in the mission social fabric. For example, she points to abiding differences in missionary and Aboriginal ideas about corporal punishment, and she never loses sight of the instrumentalism of Aboriginal people for whom the food quest had long been every individual’s pressing concern. She notes that one Aboriginal response to a sermon was the shouted question: when are we getting something to eat?

The possibility that souls can be sites of a contest may point to a contest within Ganter herself between the soul of the secular historian and the Catholic girl from rural Germany who makes a brief appearance on page 176. Having revealed the biographical basis of her empathy with German Catholicism, Ganter discusses the limitations of secular histories that have emphasised that ‘missions served the interests of colonising states’ (p. 212). Ganter has two responses to that emphasis.

One points to ways that the colonial state could be quite overbearing in its dealings with mission-Indigenous communities. For example, state protection policies made certain missions into receiving depots for children removed from their natural families, whether or not the missionaries wanted to perform this function. Ganter writes that such missions ‘were in a pincer of expectations’ (p. xix). Another example of state and mission at odds is that some missions in the north encouraged intermarriage between Asian Catholics and Aboriginal Catholics, but officials in Western Australia opposed the formation of Asian-Aboriginal families. A third example of tensions between the state and missions is that state land policies did not give mission communities security of tenure, and governments until the 1970s were deaf to missionaries’ land rights advocacy.

Ganter’s other response to the intellectual and political overconfidence of secular humanist history is that she insists that we make the imaginative effort to empathise with missionary spirituality and with Indigenous points of view. What she says about

Indigenous points of view has to be gleaned partly from non-Aboriginal writings, but that attempt has to be made. Ganter explains in her concluding chapter that mission history should:

[take] into honest account the intentions, processes and outcomes at play. The question of intentions has been the prerogative of histories written from within the churches that are bent on giving due credit for effort. A focus on the process tends to be the domain of Indigenous memories of mission life that are inclined to emphasise pain. The outcomes, finally, are more in the viewfinder of academic treatments that leverage critical analysis in the framework of empire and colonialism. This book has attempted to span these perspectives, not working deductively from a theory or model, but inductively sorting through a massive amount of detailed record (p. 211).

Industrious, multilingual Regina Ganter has shown that it is possible to deal with the intentions, processes and outcomes of missions to Indigenous Australians. The book is outstanding not only because it covers so much time and space, and not only because it uses sources that few historians can or will use. On top of all this, Ganter has written the best kind of history – that is, a history that makes you think about the limitations of your own standpoint as an historian. German Catholic tradition is being subtly channelled in this book, as Ganter challenges academic history's secular humanist self-assurance.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 42, 2018*,
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2018 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.