Jennifer Bird review of Kirsten McKenzie, 
*Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 318 pp., PB $36.95, ISBN 9781107686793

From the outset Kirsten McKenzie lays out the potential for a salacious and scandalous (bordering on the comedic) narrative by providing a cast of main characters for quick reference for the reader to know who’s who in the theatre that was the British colonial administration in the midst of transformation in the 1820s. The protagonist William Edwards, also known as Alexander Loe Kaye (hereafter known as Edwards), a notary and escaped convict, is craftily woven through the dialogue as what McKenzie describes as ‘a fulcrum around which much larger changes in imperial administration would revolve’ (p. 3). Edwards, she reveals, was a reluctant player ‘in an uncanny series of temporal and geographic connections’ (p. 6). Coinciding with John Thomas Bigge’s Commission of Inquiry in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land, and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry (along with William Colebrooke) at the Cape of Good Hope, Edwards played a pivotal role in agitating political and colonial administrative unrest. He was involved in the prize slave criminal libel trial as a result of his client, merchant Lancelot Cooke, having a disagreement with Charles Blair over the assignment of Jean Ellé that provoked a scandal over the treatment of liberated Africans. Both Edwards and Cooke were charged and after inducing large public interest, they were acquitted. A second criminal libel case was brought against Edwards a month later for sending two libellous letters to Governor Somerset. This time he was found guilty and sentenced to transportation to New South Wales. Finally, the placard scandal broke, which concerned Governor Somerset and James Berry being caught in a compromising position. Edwards was suspected of involvement in writing the placard even though he was imprisoned at the time. All three cases occurred in the Cape Colony in 1824. As a result, Edwards challenged the legalities of criminal libel, banishment and transportation, freedom of the press, as well as vexed issues over transnational laws and sovereignty. He was an enigma, described as a patriot and an activist, and accused of being Bigge’s covert agent. He was a case of both acquired identity and mistaken identity. Or was he? Not even in death was this certain.
But far from a ‘rollicking convict anecdote’, McKenzie, a professor of history at the University of Sydney, uses biography as her approach with which to reveal the unfolding transformation of the British colonial order (p. 13).\(^1\) Simply put, biography allows the reconstruction and an examination of a life course in which meaning can be drawn. The question of the historiographical and methodological value of an individual life is raised here. Historians Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart have considered this in their book *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives*. They explain:

> The intellectual challenge faced by anyone who was to narrate convict lives is epistemological; what meanings can we legitimately attach to documents (textual or material) which are the source for knowing the past? How can we narrate the lives of people long dead?\(^2\)

Further, they say, ‘[a]s a conceptual problem, the issue is highly complex and theoretical’.\(^3\) This has not deterred McKenzie, and she shows the usefulness of the single case in history. She places Edwards’s story in the context of the British colonial administration to elucidate political and social change. She contends that ‘the view from the margins provides us with a different way of understanding the cultural history of imperial politics’ (p. 8). Moreover, she claims: “The book … highlights the importance of taking gossip, paranoia, factional infighting and political spin seriously to show the extent to which ostensibly marginal figures and events influenced the transformation of nineteenth-century British empire” (Back cover).

An interesting twist is that we see these events from a different perspective, one other than the traditional biographies of ‘great men’. With main players such as Lord Charles Henry Somerset, Governor of the Cape, Charles Blair and William Wilberforce Bird, the Comptrollers of Customs, and Daniel Dennysen, Cape fiscal, not to mention Bigge, as well as bit players such as James Barry, army medical officer and inspector-general of hospitals at the Cape, Ralph Darling, Governor of New South Wales and Francis Forbes, Chief Justice of New South Wales, it is easy to see why marginal characters such as Edwards get sidelined. McKenzie, however, was alert to Edwards’s duplicity and his ability to place himself in positions of influence. She was able to see Edwards as an individual agent in the larger story.

Overlooked by other historians, McKenzie was in search of reasons why Edwards was written out or pushed to the side of existing historical narratives (p. 13). She says many of her questions were inspired by tracking Edwards through unpublished

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1 McKenzie describes Frank Clune’s depiction of Kaye/Edwards in *Scallywags of Sydney Cove* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1968), as being ‘consigned firmly to the annals of rollicking convict anecdote’.


manuscripts, and confidential and public sources (p. 17). The value of sources cannot be overstated in biography, for if they are limited, what meanings can we assign to them? Can we effectively reconstruct and examine a life course?

The bulk of the sources McKenzie consults focus predominantly on the early 1820s in the Cape Colony. In fact, the bulk of the book also focuses on that period, most notably on the events in the year 1824. Nevertheless, she weaves expertly through the fragmentary evidence to expose not only the machinations of colonial administrations but also the tightknit relationships within them. The use of both private and public correspondence in colonial times served as protection as well as deflection for the authors. They were designed to act together (p. 80). We can hear Edwards’s voice as well as his character in his correspondence and from the testimony of others. For instance, McKenzie examines Somerset’s candid relationship with Bigge through their private correspondence. Although only one side of their correspondence is available, she recognises that Somerset’s writing becomes ‘increasingly strained and emotional’, ‘[d]escending into an illegible scrawl’ as the events provoked by Edwards unfolded (pp. 194–95). These narratives previously ignored or overlooked are complex, and at times messy, but are elements of the whole. McKenzie goes to pains to confirm or dismiss sources, all the while cross-checking, analysing and explaining all to the reader.

Even though Edwards was fundamental to the story, I was occasionally left feeling like he had all but disappeared, so much focus on context and exchanges between others were made. But these are important too. For the biographer, their subject is central to the narrative; this is not necessarily so for the historian.

McKenzie places large quotes from private and public correspondence throughout the book. Usually this is seen as distracting and demonstrating little analysis. In this case, however, the dialogue is rich for its prose and content: it speaks for itself. So titillating in parts no other author could do them justice. Here the direct quotes signpost authenticity in a somewhat murky and almost unbelievable story. As the saying goes, ‘you can’t make this stuff up’!

This style opens itself to explore relationships of the marginal and the main characters. McKenzie artfully peels back the layers of individuals, their interpersonal networks and the colonial society that they lived within and exposes the challenges and issues of how the British rule of law operated in the colonies. These interconnected, transnational relationships reveal the importance of reputation and honour, status and class, and manipulation and corruption within the colonial administration. The parliamentary commissions of enquiry were the impetus of imperial reform where the commissioners’s role was to investigate but not take action (p. 128). For their part, they were observers, confidants, recorders, but unable to take immediate action. The government, on the other hand, took matters into it’s own hands. For example, McKenzie relates correspondence around
the government suppressing the *South African Commercial Advertiser* to avoid publicity over the second libel trial. Farcical scenes played out when a warrant for the suppression of the press was enacted. A member of the Court of Justice was covered in printing ink, the fiscal nearly lost his hand on an iron plate, and yet the news was still distributed, thrown from an upper-storey window on hand-laid inked sheets because the government had failed to also seal the type (pp. 192–93). And with rumours of spies, conspiracies and espionage underlining the colonial administration, although McKenzie rightly points out they would more commonly be ad hoc and opportunistic members of the wider community, all the elements were there for a grand theatrical production (p. 93).

Even though the fair weight of the book focuses on one period of significant events, Edwards’s life plays out chronologically. We are taken through his background, his career, his convictions, his transportation, his escape, his time in the Cape, his marriage to Elizabeth, his transportation, his time in New South Wales and finally his sudden death on Norfolk Island. Throughout, McKenzie tussles with Edwards’s actions. She says: ‘Of all the difficulties in telling Edwards’s story, the most challenging is the near impossibility of interpreting his reasoning and motives’ (p. 160). Eventually she concedes Edwards had ‘an apparent inability to refrain from injudicious personal attacks on any figure in authority’ (p. 162). Nevertheless, she claims Edwards played both a deliberate and inadvertent role in the transformation of imperial structures of the New South Wales and Cape colonies (p. 8). She does well to navigate the intricacies of his life. Convicts having an alias was not unusual for the time; however, not all convicts escaped the colony and turned up in another causing so much havoc with a colonial administration.

McKenzie made concessions too. Increasingly, colonial histories are noted for their inclusion, or more importantly exclusion, of indigenous peoples and their place in the evolving society. She admits there is little focus on missionaries and indigenous peoples in the book because they did not factor in the life and activities of Edwards (p. 48). It was likely Edwards had some sort of interaction with indigenous peoples, both in New South Wales and South Africa, but without evidence it would be pure speculation. Bookended by Norfolk Island, I would have like to have known more about Edwards’s short time there, particularly his relationships with others on the island. I wonder if he was able to undermine the colonial administration there before he hanged himself, or was it in itself another protest against them? In any case, it was the closing act of this fascinating story.

McKenzie could have chosen any one of the ‘great men’ to take centre stage of this history. Instead, she chose an apparent outlier. The dialogue is richer for it. She makes a convincing argument to use biography to provide new understandings of our colonial past. Her intriguing and meticulously researched analysis demonstrates individual convicts were instrumental in the transformation of administration of the British colonies and should not be written out or pushed to the side of historical
narratives. We have moved beyond the rollicking convict anecdote to a place where the serious biographical approach reveals that individuals had agency within the administration and were active participants, whether as agitators or agents of change. Further historical life course analysis of individuals, particularly those who are seemingly outliers, would add to the debate. Using the sensational life and death of an escaped convict to tell the story of the transformation of the British colonial order is a huge ask of any person; however, Edwards, through McKenzie, has found his place in history. I can only imagine he would be quite pleased at being recognised in this way!