

White Women, Aboriginal Missions and Australian Settler Governments: Maternal Contradictions

by Joanna Cruickshank and Patricia Grimshaw

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In the last couple of decades there has been a steady stream of research on the gendered history of missions and women's place within them. *White Women, Aboriginal Missions and Australian Settler Government: Maternal Contradictions* is the first full-length monograph on the subject in Australia and it brings important new interpretations to bear on that output. It sees missions as 'maternal institutions' within settler polities, performing 'useful but fundamentally subordinate work' (p. 177) as carers of Aboriginal people, and it explores how 'maternal contradictions' lead to fraught and complex relationships between missions, the state and Indigenous peoples. This is an ambitious project that the authors are well placed to tackle. Since the publication of *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Hawaii* in 1989, Patricia Grimshaw has written extensively on the gendered history of missions and their relationship with colonialism, and has supervised and mentored a wide range of projects in these fields. Joanna Cruickshank's work in the cultural history of religion and spirituality makes her ideally suited for the close reading of official and personal Christian texts central to this book's interpretations.

The authors argue that missionary maternalism was particularly strong in Australia because, unlike missionary sites in India, China and North America, where missionary schools and training colleges were established, the missionary home remained the kernel of missionary endeavour. In a context where there was 'a foundational lack of land rights' this gave missions a particularly close relationship with government protection regimes and meant that the 'inequitable' work of mothering constrained both missionary women and Indigenous peoples. The authors conclude that it was

women's hard work that explains, at least in part, why Aboriginal people preferred missions to the violence of settler society and why they accepted missionaries as mediators; but women missionaries also participated in the destruction of Aboriginal cultures and could rarely provide 'life-long commitment' to child rearing.

The book does not attempt to be comprehensive but its broadly chronological arrangement of case studies reflects change and continuity over time as well as the range of ways maternal contradictions could operate: within marriages in the early colonies; among mothers and daughters in late nineteenth-century Victoria; for wives, widows and sisters in far north Queensland; single women in faith missions in New South Wales; religious refugees in the early twentieth-century south-east; and teachers and nurses in the north.

Perhaps the most compelling chapter narrates a series of 'small encounters' between two families of mothers and daughters – one white and the other Aboriginal – on Ramahyuck mission station, in late nineteenth-century Victoria. It is based on a rich collection of letters that makes the contradictions of the mission station vividly clear and deeply poignant. They suggest that 'real affection' could develop between white and Aboriginal women – indeed that Aboriginal women could 'mother' white women in some circumstances. But within the larger missionary context, Aborigines were on the receiving end of 'mothering' and resented its oppressive surveillance: in the memorable words of one young girl, they 'watch us like a cat watching for a mouse' (p. 62). In the longer term the race hierarchy that gave white woman authority left Aboriginal people exposed to a regime marked by bureaucratic regulation, shifting authority figures and the forced combining of different communities.

While the focus is on white women, the authors have mined the sources in order to discern the perspective of Aboriginal actors. The chapter that does this in the most sustained way traces the histories of those attracted to non-mainstream religions in the early twentieth century. It is generally assumed that there was little Aboriginal activism between 1900 and 1920 but Grimshaw and Cruickshank show how Aborigines in this period used the language and precepts of Christianity to critique those who claimed to uphold it. Protectors were threatened by Aborigines who converted to Pentecostalism, fearing its enthusiasm and bodily expressiveness might encourage political activism. And though faith missionaries rarely supported activism against Protection Boards many of the Aboriginal activists of the 1920s and 1930s came from communities where faith missions flourished. The Day of Mourning was a rejection of missionary maternalism, even as its leaders drew on the language of Christianity and missionary networks.

By the mid-twentieth century, the contradictions within missionary maternalism had become extreme, as the conflicting narratives of Bill and Geraldine MacKenzie's time at Aurukun in Queensland make clear. Within the missionary world, the MacKenzies were proponents of new more respectful waves of missiological thought, but to anthropologists their control of the mission through violence was anathema. The juxtaposition of these divergent depictions highlights the ultimate contradiction in missionaries acting as state officials by this time: protective legislation gave them such 'extraordinary power' over Aboriginal people's lives that violence was normalised. As the authors note, the Moravians who founded the Queensland missions in the late nineteenth century would have been horrified to find that MacKenzie carried a gun.

The authors have presented copious evidence of the cramping effects of the mission-as-home, though some explanation of why this was characteristic of Australia would have further layered the text. But this is a deeply considered, sustained analysis that makes an important contribution, not just to the history of missions, but to the contested history of protection regimes. The stories are told without judgementalism but not without ethical judgement. In addition to fleshing out the impacts of individuals within these systems, they lay bare gross imbalances in the structures of power, how they were perpetuated and how they were sometimes subverted.

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