

## ***Imperial Emotions: The Politics of Empathy across the British Empire***

by Jane Lydon

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Over 30 years ago Thomas W. Laqueur published an influential essay called ‘Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative’ in Lynn Hunt’s edited collection *The New Cultural History* (1989). In it he argued that all manner of texts – case histories and autopsies were his focus – were vehicles for structures of seeing and feeling that induced empathic readers to embrace social improvement and even political change. In that compact essay, he offered not just a theory about the historical links between middling-class empathy and social reform but an argument about the presumptively liberal, even emancipatory, agency of the white Western witness to the crises and violences of modernity – an argument that scholars have been testing ever since.

Laqueur’s onlookers did not countenance empire and Laqueur himself has never taken the imperial turn. Nor did affect or emotion play an explicit role in his account. In her erudite and richly researched study, Jane Lydon illustrates how circulations of sentiment set in motion by imperial conquest and colonial settlement in an Anglo-Australasian world provincialise Laqueur’s early work, suggesting that anyone taking up the humanitarian narrative framework must reckon with its origins not just in empire but in white settler modernity writ large. Of particular urgency for Lydon is the necessity of coming to grips with how representations of Indigenous people and, where possible, the experiences and engagements of Indigenous communities themselves shaped the political effects that the drama of imperial emotions provoked. The book begins with the 1841 Rufus River massacre and ends with the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart and the Makarrata (reconciliation) Commission. In effect, Lydon is proposing that we understand the psychic life of empire not as immaterial to conquest and resistance, settlement and rebellion, but as a force that is utterly

consequential to how those histories unfolded over two centuries. It's arguably the strongest claim made yet in empire history for the material work of emotion in the making (and the limits) of British imperial power.

Emotion is a big category and, in Lydon's hands, it's a capacious hold-all as well. Though empathy gets a lot of attention at the front end of the book, the anger and fear arising out of the violence and precarity of white settlement cannot but take centre stage. Lydon teases out how and under what conditions 'imperialist nostalgia' serves as a container for the good, the bad and the ugly in all their many temporalities. That the two main examples Lydon gives of such nostalgia turn on women – the so-called last Tasmanian, Truganini, and Nyoongar elder Fanny Balbuk Yooreel (pp. 48–49) – reminds us how entangled the empire of emotion was with gender and sexuality. Victimhood, ridicule, compassion, contempt and even admiration (all expressed through 'virtuous tears' [p. 81]) were shot through with the binary logics of masculinity and femininity in decidedly white anglophone modes. How and whether those modalities mapped onto indigenous ways of being is not taken up. Meanwhile, the class-based interests of a perpetually unsettled white settler capitalism are notable, as Lydon's stage-setting story of Aussie humiliation on the TV show *The News Quiz* in 2013 underscores. What British jokes at Australians' expense really signify is the liberal British Left's 'distaste for its own proletariat'. Lydon's book details many such displacements and reorientations across the Australasian world she traverses. In a particularly astute analysis of responses to the Myall Creek massacre, she observes: 'Framing frontier atrocity as convict crime allowed both colonists and humanitarians to displace their own complicity in Indigenous dispossession' (p. 62).

Readers of Lydon's earlier work will continue to be impressed by how deftly and compellingly she uses visual evidence to support her claims about how sentiment circulated and why the development of photography contributed to the creation and maintenance of grammars of racial difference. The still image moved across the white settler world via the lantern slide, carrying with it so many humanitarian narratives that we might speak of the globalisation of 'telescopic philanthropy' (p. 119) by the beginning of the twentieth century. As riveting are Lydon's chapters on the antipodean circulation of two primers of reformist emotion, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. She follows both of these texts as they moved into the hands of white settler and Aboriginal reading communities, where they found different resonances but were absorbed and appropriated well beyond the sensation-loving Victorian era that generated them. It turns out that Stowe was a dense transfer point for knowledge of nineteenth-century US slavery for Aboriginal and white settler readers alike, with real effects for the ways that Aboriginal child removal was understood into the interwar period across the Pacific world. *Bleak House*, for its part, carried resentments against metropolitan reformist preferences for the uplift of distant Blacks over the white orphan closer to home.

This particular empathy contest is illustrated by an impressive range of interrelated images from the Victorian period that cultivated 'not feeling sorry for Blacks' (p. 117) through the pathetic figure of Jo the crossing-sweep boy, an urban icon competing for sympathy with Mrs Jellyby's deserving Africans.

Lydon ends the book with a chapter on popular royalism, which takes up 'Aboriginal 'loyalty' to the Crown' (p. 170) from the 1820s down to the present. The discomfiture we may feel at the continuous history of Indigenous fidelity and, at times, submission to monarchical authority throws us back on the pain points we are inclined, perhaps, to avoid even as we are committed to decolonising originary humanitarian narratives. Happily, Lydon is fearless in the face of these challenges. And when it comes to the history of emotions and empire, she has given us an exemplar of the form.

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