

Taking Liberty: Indigenous Rights and Settler Self-Government in Colonial Australia, 1830–1890

by Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell

446 pp., Cambridge University Press, 2018,
ISBN: 9781107084858 (hbk), £75.00

Review by Paula Jane Byrne

Visiting Scholar, State Library of New South Wales

This is a streamlined, engaging history of the constructing of self-government and its entanglements with Indigenous policy in Australia. An immensely detailed book, it is written primarily from secondary sources and as such follows the grain of what we have come to know as ‘settler’ historiography. This emerged in the late 1990s at a time when Indigenous histories and theoretical approaches seem to have faded from the consciousness of non-Aboriginal historians. As such this book follows the predominant tendency in settler historiography to prioritise the settler state and its discourses, portraying Aboriginal people as both caught in them and reacting to them.

The book does not situate itself in this settler historiography but in a far earlier division between the optimistic history of self-government and an entirely separate history of dispossession and destruction of Indigenous peoples. In this sense the book seems aimed at a popular audience. I am not sure if this derives from authors, agent or publisher but it does introduce complex questions about where and who we are as historians. History writing creates the past and if driven by ideas of popular demand and public interest it is in chains.

The book argues that the colonies making up Australia were not uniform in their approach to Indigenous policy. This is because there was great confusion as to who was responsible for Indigenous people, England or the colonies themselves, and what form this responsibility should take. England was the site of Imperial conscience and seems to have slipped out of its duty through pretend discussion leading nowhere, a plea of inadequate funding and a fear of the expense of military

engagement. Time after time the book shows enlightened individuals whose projects disintegrated or were ignored in favour of an inchoate status quo – one that the book's conclusion suggests still remains.

While Aboriginal people may have considered themselves subjects and citizens, particularly in relation to the Crown, they were not viewed as such by any colonial government. The authors claim that Aboriginal people learned of the Crown through missionaries and hence developed the idea of the Crown as central and important. They write of successive delegations to Royal visitors. In this point the analysis seems simplistic. Looking to Indigenous writers we discover literate Aboriginal people also read the newspapers and sometimes wrote to them,¹ and the struggle between the invasive squatting interest and the Crown filled the press of the 1840s. It was the settler state that denied citizen and subject status to Indigenous people, this was not necessarily the perspective of Aboriginal people themselves.

The book shows the vibrancy of debate in the anti-transportation movement in New South Wales and Tasmania, and that this time of fanfare and joy of elections gave little attention to Indigenous people except for the creation of the resilient myth that servants were the most genocidal of the colonists. England began to fear the impact of self-government on Indigenous people. The book gives a thorough history of self-government in each colony and follows small references to Aboriginal people with determination. The ad hoc and haphazard nature of moves to self-government is expertly captured and we discover the reason for the absence of Aboriginal people from Australian history. The rhetoric did not include them, the archive directed research, and so the state recreated itself in its history. Expediency determined Imperial Indigenous policy, not rights. Such expediency allowed a kind of whispered transferral of responsibility for Aboriginal people. To capture all of this in one book is a great achievement and this makes it a very important addition to Australian history.

When we follow the tracks of current settler historiography we naturally have greater detail for some places and not others. The book is microscopic in some places, not in others. The archive determines what kind of history has been written. So much colonial ethnography in Victoria has shaped the discourse about Victorian Aboriginal people and, I would venture, shaped Aboriginal politics. The ethnographic interest was not so influential in the historical writing of New South Wales or Western Australia where we non-Aboriginal Australian historians only became aware of different Noongar groups around Perth very recently. At times in this book we dig deep, at times our nails scratch the surface. Libby Connors, with Black Brisbane influence, recognised the Aboriginal polity in Brisbane and in *Taking Liberty* it stays there around Brisbane when in reality it stretches across Australia.

1 Bond, 'Dali'pie the Statesman', 87–112.

If Aboriginal people around Brisbane had their own political concerns and non-Aboriginal readings and perspectives were not central to them in this most violent region, the same must hold for Aboriginal people across Australia.

There's the rub. Māori writers have criticised settler historiography as making them wallpaper to the grand narratives of the conquerors. In concentrating on settler views and settler politics don't we simply strengthen that narrative? This book does consider and address Aboriginal agency and it does give a marvellous streamlined history of the whole continent, but this is a notion of Aboriginal agency that is secondary to the constructing of that streamlined account. Here, Aboriginal people react and respond to English and colonial initiatives. If the book had begun with the Aboriginal polity, hinted at, described since Phillip and, admittedly, politically fraught for those who seek to describe it today, the history it makes would be vastly different. Disentangling the influences as to why this particular book appears now is a worthwhile project.

Reference

Bond, Alex. 'Dali'pie the Statesman'. *Southerly* 71, no. 2 (2011): 87–112.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 44, 2020*, edited by Crystal McKinnon and Ben Silverstein, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.