

Maria Nugent review of Kate Fullagar, *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist: Three Lives in an Age of Empire*

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Writing the lives of Indigenous people has been an enduring interest in colonial and post-colonial contexts around the world. Some Indigenous people are well known, their life stories told, retold and refashioned for—or by—each new generation. They are often presented as moral tales, and rather than representing the particularity and singularity of the individual come to stand for a collective experience or a larger cultural and historical phenomenon in the contact zones created by imperial travels and traders and within early colonial settlements. Over time, influenced by historiographical developments and methodological innovations as much as shifts in social and cultural expectations, the ways in which the lives of prominent Indigenous people are told undergo continual revision, sometimes quite considerably as questions of agency, desire, contingency and opportunity come into play.

The two Indigenous men at the heart of Fullagar's book—the Cherokee Ostenaco and the Ra'iatean Mai—travelled to England with an eye to leveraging what Britain potentially offered for shoring up his own and his countrymen's and women's local futures. They each departed from and returned to a precarious, unstable and fast-moving situation. In her treatment of Ostenaco and Mai, Fullagar places their travels to Britain within a much broader context than has hitherto been the case, and a much wider historical and political context both within and outside Britain, and crucially also more proportionately situated within the scope of their own individual lives.

Their respective arrival and presence in the heart of empire is not *the* subject of the story, in the way that Fullagar had explored for other eighteenth-century Indigenous travellers in her previous book, *The Savage Visit*, and which Coll Thrush has expertly done in *Indigenous London*. Rather, Fullagar seeks to loosen the pull of the imperial centre in the ways in which she has conceived and structured this study. Certainly, it is their travels to London that provide the hook for them both to appear within the same book because it is there that they both have their portrait painted by the artist of the book's title, Joshua Reynolds. Ostenaco's portrait is painted in 1762; Mai's in 1774. One is created at the start of Reynolds's celebrated career; the other at a turning point in it. One of the paintings is kept private and falls into obscurity; the other is a cause celebre the moment it is exhibited. The book therefore is based on this contingency, but Fullagar puts that accident to good analytical use. The stories

of Ostenaco's and Mai's quite disparate lives, as Fullagar narrates them, do not cohere around nor culminate in their imperial visit. As formative or as memorable as their fleeting meetings with Reynolds might have been for the two Indigenous visitors to London, Fullagar is careful not to mobilise all of her material for that illuminating moment as though it is only when Indigenous people explicitly or directly engage with imperial Britain that anything of importance happens.

Fullagar rejects that assumption. Indeed, one of the most powerful aspects of the book is the way in which it queries our understandings of empire—or imperialism. Contributing to what is sometimes referred to as 'new imperial history', she reveals a series of overlapping empires that are radically reshaped through their encounters and, especially, through war and conquest. As she makes clear in her citations and acknowledgements, this ambitious project to bring various imperial formations and struggles into a single frame is made possible by the close-grained, ethnographically rich studies of Indigenous politics that are recorded in the margins of the history of British imperial wars and other interventions in North America and the Pacific during the eighteenth century. One of the major insights of cross-cultural scholarship on James Cook's three Pacific voyages is that the British mariners sometimes entered delicate intra-island political situations, and the outsiders were mobilised, sometimes unwittingly, for local interests. This is vital to understanding a man like Mai, and his motivations to travel to Britain on Cook's second voyage and remain there for two years until he could cadge a ride home on Cook's third voyage. His homeland had been invaded by the Bora Borans, and he was in search of an advantage that would enable him to overthrow them. In particular, he had his eye on British weaponry, believing that returning with an artillery would be a means to do away with the colonising islanders who threatened his ancestral estate.

Ostenaco by contrast went with a small delegation to England with the express purpose of having an audience with the British king. This was a tradition that was already well developed by the mid-1700s. The delegation's experience in Britain conformed to the itinerary that had been established, and that would continue well into the nineteenth century during Queen Victoria's reign. But in some ways the chapters on Ostenaco and Mai in England, while fascinating, are less revealing than the chapters that precede and follow them—or to put that another way, it is the chapters that come before and after that illuminate those imperial sojourns in new ways; the reader already knows the experiences, contexts and inheritances that the two men bring with them as they encounter imperial Britain and the still-changing worlds to which they return and where they will die, their hopes yet to be realised.

The first four chapters are devoted to Ostenaco's life and times. The reader is introduced to him through the world, family and town into which he is born and his development as a warrior and leader. Drawing selectively and intelligently on mainly ethnographic sources, Fullagar reveals the structures and dynamics of Cherokee society and politics and its reshaping through the protracted wars on

American frontiers involving the British, French and Americans. Through Ostenaco, new perspectives are offered on those conflicts—the sustained and sincere efforts at diplomacy, the ineptitude of some key British officials, the vagaries of inter-town relations, and the bone-deadening labour of fighting battles on many fronts, sometimes through hand-to-hand combat and sometimes through the gentle arts of persuasion for the hearts and minds of compatriots.

The second half of the book, composed of another four chapters, is devoted to Mai. Compared to Ostenaco, Mai is a much younger man, operating more independently, but motivated as much by a desire to win back his ancestral country—not from European and American colonists as for Ostenaco, but from the invading Bora Borans. He sees Britain as a source of resources and assistance, although he will learn a cruel lesson in the pragmatics of voyaging diplomacy when goods and gifts he believed destined for him are distributed by Cook to people he deemed undeserving.

In ways that seem entirely appropriate, Reynolds is not given his own section in the book. Cleverly, his story is wedged between the life stories of the Cherokee warrior and the Ra'iatean voyager—and in that way his life story becomes subordinate to theirs. It becomes entangled within the historical themes that Ostenaco's and Mai's life stories engender. In one chapter devoted to him, inserted between three on Ostenaco, the reader learns of Reynolds's early life and influences and his fledgling artistic career as he seeks to establish himself. In the second chapter on Reynolds, which appears in Mai's section, the emphasis shifts both to his status in British art circles as well as to larger debates about empire and race. Fullagar makes excellent historical use of Reynolds's biography, particularly as she uses him as a vehicle for showing just how contested views about British imperialism were. Reynolds lends himself to that historiographical task because he cultivated a certain ambivalence about anything controversial, an orientation that Fullagar shows was well suited to an ambitious artist making his way. His closest friends and wider social circle represented different positions on Britain's overseas interventions. For instance, his friend Edmund Burke was pro-American settlement while his other intimate, Samuel Johnson, 'thought territorial colonists were mostly thieves and slavers' (p. 67). It is unclear where Reynolds himself actually stood on any of the arguments, but his artistic output provides a rich source for exploring the possibilities and limits of engaging with and understanding cultural difference and race. Fullagar pursues this by arguing that Reynolds's portrait of Ostenaco failed whereas his portrait of Mai 'worked'. The difference, she suggests, lies not only in the maturing skills of the painter, or the inherent interest of the 'subject'. Rather, she shows that British imperial culture was transformed particularly by the voyages of James Cook, and thus by the influence of Indigenous people. With that came an experiment in developing a visual language for expressing and representing other cultures and, importantly, other polities. In tracing these cultural projects and productions, Fullagar combines

skill in art history to analyse Reynolds's oeuvre and the skills of cultural history to interpret his and others' writings and speeches, including Reynolds's annual speech to the Royal Academy.

The book's triangular structure, in which Reynolds is the hinge that brings the other two lives into the same frame, works extremely well because they are all mobilised for the larger historical project of illuminating 'an age of empire' (as the book's subtitle puts it). Rather than working from the British imperial centre outwards, the book reverses that direction. Its two distinct parts begin in other imperial contexts where struggles for authority, sovereignty and territory are a feature of local Indigenous politics and which are being made even more complicated by the incursion of British imperial travellers and settlers. In the reconstruction of each man's life, Fullagar keeps the problem of empire and how we understand it at the forefront, persuasively making the reader question the assumptions of British imperialism and empire history that circulate in both academic and popular spheres. In this regard, Fullagar provides a model for how life stories of Indigenous people can be brought to bear on larger historical issues, so that the project of Indigenous biography goes beyond only retrieving lost lives and accumulating yet more stories about certain individuals. This book pushes beyond those limits, showing the value of the biographical method for historical analysis and understanding.

Writing Indigenous lives is undergoing a renaissance. A series of projects, such as the Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography at The Australian National University, and publications, such as a recent special issue of *Biography* edited by Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice, are revisiting some of the challenges involved—from the patchy quality of archival sources to more philosophical questions about subjectivity and vitae. These are issues that have been around for a long time, and Fullagar is alert to them. Without overdoing it, she reflects on subjectivity as an Enlightenment obsession, and the problems of sources for reconstructing Indigenous lives. About the challenge of piecing together Ostenaco's origins, she writes: 'So often when aspects of Ostenaco do emerge through the mesh of overlain sources they show up the inadequacies of biography's conventions. In the absence of an assumption about a life's beginning, ending, or motivation start to come undone. Did Ostenaco even have a cradle?' (p. 12). She also makes it clear where her analysis necessarily becomes more speculative than surefooted.

And all of this is done in an engaging narrative style, so engaging that it can sometimes be easy (perhaps too easy) to miss the import of what is being said. That is always a struggle, particularly in narrative history of this kind. The joy here is that book can be read for the interest in the interlocking lives, but its real satisfactions rest on the rich seams of scholarship on which it builds to re-present imperial history with biographic intensity. It serves to realise the latent potential of that incredibly rich ethnographic and historical research to transform easy or lazy ideas about imperial pasts and legacies far more nuanced and complex. It eschews the idea that there

is imperial history and Indigenous history, and we choose to do one or the other. It pursues the historical project of entanglement, and works hard not to privilege the British or European side of the equation. This is harder to do than this book suggests, wearing its erudition lightly and making its analysis accessible. Here then is an intelligent and innovative book that is sure to become a classic.

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