

Conclusion

Christian philanthropic work amongst Indigenous Australians was a form of governance considered unlikely and limited from its earliest manifestations, a view that philanthropists themselves alternately challenged, utilised or reinforced. A final impression of missionary failure may have triumphed in these early decades, although, as demonstrated, we can still trace alternative Indigenous views, as well as interrogating exactly what failure meant to the missionaries themselves. Furthermore, the closure of the first missions and protectorates did not signal an end to Christian and government intervention in Indigenous issues; quite the contrary. Subsequent decades saw a growth in new missions and government stations, including Poonindie, Bethesda and Hermannsburg in South Australia; Ebenezer, Ramahyuck, Coranderrk and Framlingham in Victoria; Maloga and Warangesda in New South Wales; Fraser Island in Queensland; and Camfield in Western Australia. In the first 'civilising' projects, considered here, we can trace the origins of later (often more powerful) agendas, whilst also observing how they were shaped by varied circumstances of governance, advocacy, material power and control over land and cultural life. Mission and protectorate histories, when viewed from different angles, can appear in terms of particularity and disruption, or of tenacious continuity. Ongoing controversies over the history of church and state power in Indigenous people's lives – most notably in the forced removal of Aboriginal children – indicate the relevance of this area of research.

Scholarly interest in Australian philanthropic history appears to be strong and ongoing. Works in this field over the past decade have focused on topics as diverse as educational approaches in mission schools, visual and spatial regimes on missions, cultural exchanges between Christianity and older Indigenous beliefs, and the relationships of paternalism, authority and obligation that developed between philanthropists and Indigenous people.¹ The breadth of these studies is suggestive of how historians' approach to mission history has changed from fairly straightforward admiration or condemnation, to a greater interest in missions as sites of personal, cultural and imperial encounters. Helen Bethea Gardner, in her work on missions in Oceania, has commented 'Perhaps the recent explosion of anthropological research of Oceanic Christianity is a sign that Christianity is now so foreign to most in the West that it can be studied as an alien institution'.² Certainly, Australian missionaries' own beliefs and behaviours have become problematised and considered legitimate subjects of enquiry and critique, often by secular scholars. This does not indicate a lack of

1 For example, Barry 2006, pp.169–182; Broome 2006: 43.1–43.16; Carey and Roberts 2002: 821–869; Lydon 2005: 211–234; Magowan 2005: 157–175; Reed 2004: 87–99; Scrimgeour 2006: 35–46; Van Gent 2005: 227–248.

2 Gardner 2006: 13.

immediacy or relevance, however. A number of historians of early philanthropy – notably, Henry Reynolds, Elizabeth Elbourne and Anna Johnston³ – have linked it strongly to contemporary debates over colonialism, humanitarianism and Reconciliation. The greater visibility of philanthropists as subjects of debate is also indicative of more nuanced understandings of whiteness, imperialism and governance.

I was drawn to this project by an initial interest in tracing early humanitarian movements in the Australian colonies, including the lineage of white support for Aboriginal rights. While this is undoubtedly an important task, it has also led me to a realisation of the need to interrogate this lineage closely. From the start, philanthropists were implicated crucially in governing Indigenous Australians and recreating them as subjects of empire. Their support for Indigenous people's rights derived from understandings of Aboriginal Australians as colonised groups with traditional identities and claims to land, but also as British subjects whose futures must be shaped by the adoption of agriculture, individualist work ethics and Evangelical Christianity. Concepts of Indigenous entitlements were shaped, therefore, by beliefs about religion, paternalism and the civilising obligations of empire, as well as relationships with Indigenous people themselves, whose own ideas about obligation and exchange could not be ignored. At a time when Aboriginal rights (and indeed broader notions of human rights) are both highly visible and contested in Australian public life, it is valuable to consider the historical development of such ideas in greater detail.

Also important were creative paradoxes inherent in attempts to remake Indigenous Australians as British subjects. Current debates over Aboriginal policy have tended to assume a polarity between individualism and communal dependence on the state, but a study of early missions highlights the fact that individualist labour, self-awareness and personal religious struggles were being encouraged within a context of institutional life, where Indigenous people were understood as colonised, subordinate *groups*. This was apparent across issues as intimate as housing and hygiene, to wider discussions of Indigenous people's legal and sovereign status. While philanthropists promoted British subjecthood as a path to assimilation and (some) equality, their ideas about governance also sought to inscribe Aboriginal difference. This was further complicated by local conditions and the need to negotiate and build relationships with Indigenous people. Governance, in its day-to-day forms, could be a shifting, improvised process. As Heather Goodall has observed, 'Seen across time, invasions come to look like simple, two-sided struggles. When underway, colonial invasions were more likely to appear confused, riven with antagonisms within the contending camps and frayed with doubts.'⁴

3 For example, Elbourne 2003; Johnston 2006 58–87; Johnston 2003: 102–113; Henry Reynolds 1998.

4 Goodall 1990: 260.

A sense of missionary colonialism as both a significant, enduring heritage and an unstable, ambiguous process also emerges when we consider its legacy for the Australian nation-state. As observed, philanthropists were in some ways passionate advocates of greater governance, and yet their most vivid debates occurred over issues of imperial authority and local contests. 'Australia', *per se*, did not exist in its current form and issues of colonial self-government were treated ambivalently by Evangelical commentators. This appears challenging in a contemporary context, where Aboriginal dispossession (and the small but significant protests made by white humanitarians) have become seen as part of a national legacy. While the history of colonialism undoubtedly has a powerful relevance for Australia's identity and future, it is nonetheless important to continue debating how this history should be conceptualised, and how it has been shaped by ideas of nation and empire. More work remains to be done, for instance, on the place of Indigenous affairs within the development of Australian self-government and national identity. Such research will no doubt be facilitated by the growing scholarly interest in re-evaluating Australia's place within the British empire, after several decades of more isolated national history-writing. Furthermore, when we consider Australia's history of Indigenous dispossession and resistance – a continuing source of pain, pride, shame and controversy – it is important to keep questioning how beliefs about national inheritance and responsibility themselves have developed over the past two centuries. The sense of evangelism, sin, imperial duty and uneasy paternalism voiced by the first philanthropists may seem, to the contemporary reader, distant and foreign, yet still unnervingly relevant.