

Anti-Slavery and Australia: No Slavery in a Free Land?

by Jane Lydon

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A growing body of scholarship reveals the connections between chattel slavery and settler colonialism in Britain's nineteenth-century empire. Jane Lydon's important contribution to that work charts the profound impact of abolitionist activity and rhetoric on the colonisation of Australia. Lydon's expansive imperial framework reveals that Australian colonisation took place as – and indeed, in part, because – new forms of labour exploitation were replacing the chattel slavery so characteristic of early modern European imperialism. She also deploys an extended chronology: the book's focus is on Australia's colonial era, but Lydon's reflections on the legacies of anti-slavery for post-Federation Australia illuminate the complex interactions of race and labour through to the present day. *Anti-Slavery and Australia* offers both a nuanced historical analysis of Australian colonialism in its first 100 years and the perspective needed to reframe contemporary debates about the exploitation of labour in Australia.

Lydon rightly warns the reader against seeing 'enslavement' and 'freedom' as dichotomous: 'free' and 'unfree' labour lie on a continuum. Almost all the early nineteenth-century Britons who advocated passionately for the abolition of slavery were also committed to the moral and economic discipline of market capitalism; in the era of slave emancipation they saw the colonisation of Australia as closely bound to Britain's economic needs. This insight helps explain how grotesque inequalities between the formerly enslaved and their emancipators were not just tolerated but actively perpetuated, and why those inequalities reverberate today. It also cultivates a new perspective on Australian colonisation and its devastating consequences for Aboriginal peoples.

How does Lydon manage this and why does it matter to the readers of *Aboriginal History*? *Anti-Slavery and Australia* falls into several parts. The longest builds over five chapters from the 1770s to the ‘moment’ of emancipation in 1833: the point when – after 50 years of popular and parliamentary agitation, not to mention repeated and widespread resistance from enslaved people – Britain legislated to make chattel slavery illegal across most of its empire. Lydon’s analysis is most closely focused on ‘public political debate and the elite parliamentary-led anti-slavery movement’ (p. 6), but she demonstrates how these elites shaped the dispossession and inequality characteristic of Australian colonisation. Her case is based on a substantial body of textual sources, including parliamentary debates, government correspondence, court records, printed tracts and memoirs, but makes especially persuasive use of visual and material culture. A series of life stories illuminate how complex – and sometimes contradictory – ideas and arguments played out in practice in different colonies. Across the Australian continent and over the decades, the economic and ideological structures that Lydon dissects have most profoundly and obviously disadvantaged Aboriginal peoples, but she shows how their negative consequences extended to others without power, racial privilege or capital.

One of Lydon’s key contributions is her explanation of how British anti-slavery activists could oppose chattel slavery while endorsing – and even celebrating – other forms of economic unfreedom. The justifications elite Britons offered for their differing treatment of the British poor, Indigenous peoples and enslaved individuals shifted frequently between the 1780s and 1830s, but increasingly prioritised those racialised as ‘white’ over all others. As the rights of the British working class and the enslaved were brought into opposition, enslavement became coded as ‘black’.

In particular, Lydon examines the evangelical Christians who gave persistent voice to abolitionist arguments and provided the anti-slavery movement with its most prominent British leadership. Even as they positioned enslaved people as innocent victims of rapacious masters, abolitionist evangelicals developed a critique of Britain’s poor that blamed them for their situation. When Caribbean emancipation loomed, settler colonies were promoted as locations where capital could be invested and (first convict and then simply poor) white labour effectively regulated. Techniques and ideologies of control honed on Caribbean slave plantations were translated to southern Australia’s new colonies, while the theory of ‘systematic colonisation’ – the brainchild of Edward Gibbon Wakefield – promised to mitigate the economic risk emancipation posed for Britain’s elites. Lydon’s fifth chapter, which turns particularly to Tasmania and the early Port Phillip District, brings these complex threads together. It is here that Lydon draws out the connection between anti-slavery arguments and the theft of Indigenous land. The Aboriginal peoples of Australia were increasingly condemned – not least by those Britons committed to Indigenous protection – as idle, and in need of ‘discipline’ and ‘civilisation’; this racial othering expedited Aboriginal dispossession.

In two final chapters, Lydon surveys the later nineteenth century and turns to ‘modern slavery’. She demonstrates how Britain’s 1833 Emancipation Act – with its focus on chattel slavery – perversely contributed to labour exploitation across the empire. Indenture, convict labour, Indigenous dispossession and restrictions on who could access land, all served to secure and control non-white labour forces. These mechanisms’ divergences from chattel slavery were emphasised; their equally important similarities were ignored. In Australia, simplistic anti-slavery characterisations of enslavement paved the way for Western Australia’s late-nineteenth-century use of chains and corporal punishment for Aboriginal prisoners, and shaped debates about South Sea Islanders in Queensland. Lydon’s stark and affecting final chapter argues that we must understand this complicated history – and eschew the generalisations inherent in the tag of ‘modern slavery’ – in order to combat contemporary human trafficking and the ongoing discrimination faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Her compelling study reveals profound problems of our time as products of their deep historical context.

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