

Settler Colonial Governance in Nineteenth-Century Victoria

edited by Leigh Boucher and Lynette Russell

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In recent years, there has been a strong revival of scholarly interest in the nature of the humanitarian politics that came to reshape British imperial policy from the 1830s, an interest driven in good part by the burgeoning field of critical imperial studies. In particular, this body of scholarship has focused on the ways in which the very endeavours that were intended to protect Indigenous peoples from the dire impacts of colonial violence and dispossession were inextricably bound to new technologies of colonial governance. In bringing an array of new regulatory measures to bear upon Indigenous people around the British Empire, policies of protection were not just intended to ameliorate the consequences of colonisation but also to facilitate their transition into becoming governable subjects.

Arising from a workshop on the particularities of settler colonial governance in nineteenth-century Victoria, this collection is an important and timely addition to this recent body of work. Victoria was exceptional in that a centralised system of Indigenous ‘management’ was implemented there well before similar processes were attempted in the other Australian colonies. The speed and intensity of the ‘settler revolution’ (as James Belich has termed it) that took place in the then-Port Phillip District through the 1830s and 1840s, followed by the shift to self-government in the mid-1850s, helped to create the conditions for a concentrated model of settler colonial governance that would not be seen in the other colonies until considerably later.

The system of colonial governmentality modelled in Victoria in the wake of self-government and the coming decades did become familiar around Australia by the early twentieth century. This was a system defined by the segregation of Aboriginal people onto reserves, which later segued into a program of enforced assimilation for so-called 'half-caste' people, and the introduction of a statutory model of combined protection and management that would legalise governmental intervention into every facet of Indigenous life. As editors Leigh Boucher and Lynette Russell note at the start of their introductory chapter, in the decades after 1835 – the year of John Batman's attempt to negotiate a private treaty with the Kulin and its rejection by the Crown – Victoria could be seen as 'an historically condensed example of the creative destructions of nineteenth-century British settler colonialism' (p. 1). Even so, a counteractive feature of Victoria's elaborated system of colonial governance was that it helped to produce a powerful movement of Aboriginal political activism that was arguably more pronounced and persistent than anywhere else in nineteenth-century Australia.

In tracing the local manifestations of colonial governance and their connections to the shifting currents of governance around the British colonial world, this collection offers both a 'deep' account of the changing forms and consequences of settler colonial governance in a single jurisdiction, and a broader account of how expressions of colonial humanitarianism went hand in hand with the imposition of colonial authority. As the editors state, if Victoria is taken to be a 'laboratory' of colonial governance, it was one in which the rejection of colonial violence was principally envisioned through the introduction of an alternative framework of 'epistemological violence' (p. 4). Accordingly, in addressing the various forms that settler colonial governance took in the decades after 1851, when Victoria ceased to be New South Wales's dependent jurisdiction of Port Phillip and became a separate colony, the questions that frame the collection revolve around Victoria's status as being in some ways exceptional and in other ways emblematic of British colonialism. What shapes did settler colonial governance take after the achievement of self-government in light of local commitments to the development of colonial democracy and the maintenance of settler respectability? At the same time, how can colonial Victoria be seen to sit 'at the intersection' of both local and global forces? These questions are explored in detail in the contribution from Jessie Mitchell and Ann Curthoys, who address the core question 'how different was Victoria?' by considering its policies of protective governance from a comparative perspective.

Working broadly in the theoretical domain of settler colonial studies on the understanding that settler colonialism functions as 'a structure rather than as an event', as Patrick Wolfe famously proposed, each of the essays in this collection examines a different aspect of the structural, institutional, discursive or embodied trajectories of settler colonialism in nineteenth-century Victoria, and

its relationship to the Indigenous peoples it was designed to engage, reform or classify. Underlying the question of how settler colonial governance unfolded, then, is the more tangled question of Indigenous agency, to which all the contributors are attuned. In examining the relationships between Indigenous people and the various kinds of colonial actors with whom they intersected – from administrators to missionaries, from protectors to ethnographers – the focus of the collection is not just on the institutional impacts of settler colonial governance but also on how everyday practices of governance were exerted and challenged, how their imperatives were reworked by Indigenous people, and how the authority of the settler state was partial.

In pursuing these themes, the essays collected here follow a loosely chronological timeline and revolve around a set of concerns that deal with how different forms of colonial knowledge were produced, how they circulated through different cultural frames, and how bureaucratic structures and practices were tied to the quotidian level of everyday relationships. Throughout, the contributors are also particularly mindful of the ways in which different kinds of colonial space were socially coded, and the active role of Indigenous people in intersecting with them. In her essay on Indigenous ‘begging’ in the urbanising city of Melbourne, for instance, Lynette Russell reconceives a colonial understanding of Indigenous destitution in order to explore how Indigenous people adapted to the colonising landscape by engaging in economic action that provided access to European resources. Other essays by Claire McLisky and by Joanna Cruickshank and Patricia Grimshaw focus on the space of missions, analysing them not just as sites geared towards the spiritual and moral regulation of Indigenous people but also as ‘sites of intimate relationships, shifting power balances and complex interdependencies’ (p. 165).

Colonial institutions and practices were also directly influenced by the shifting terms of circulating colonial knowledges. As Rachel Standfield, Leigh Boucher and Jane Lydon explore in different ways, the consolidation of ethnographic discourse later in the nineteenth century helped to reshape and legitimate strategies of settler colonial governance that became increasingly geared around classifications of racial authenticity and exclusion. At the same time, as Samuel Furphy’s and Jennifer Balint et al.’s chapters suggest, institutional forms of governance in colonial Victoria never operated with blanketing power but were always themselves contested spaces, subject to internal tensions and serving as lightning rods for Indigenous political protest.

It is not uncommon in collections arising from workshops to appear somewhat disparate, joined together by broad themes but insufficiently interlinked by grounding principles. This is not the case here, where the collection’s concentrated focus on a single jurisdiction provides a detailed account of how settler colonial governance evolved over the course of decades, while it still

offers reflection on how Victoria's case speaks to the history of British colonial governance elsewhere. An effect of this focused approach is that the essays share some degree of overlap in outlining the forces that shaped colonial policy in Victoria over time, from the early protectorate of the 1840s to successive administrative phases that encompassed the workings of the Central Board, and the powers and effects of the 1869 and 1886 protection Acts. To some extent, however, this degree of overlap is unavoidable; it would be impossible to trace the deep evolutions of colonial governance in Victoria without returning to these key institutions and statutes. More broadly, given Victoria's particular place in the history of British settler colonialism both before and after the age of settler self-government, the contribution of this collection is that it deepens our understanding of settler colonial governance not just in this single jurisdiction but also in the wider context of colonial Australia and Australia's position in the British settler world. The relevance of such a project is not just historical but is ongoing. As Balint et al. remind us in their closing chapter, to live as contemporary citizens of Australia is to live inside the 'unfinished business' of settler colonialism. In drawing out the 'complex mosaic of historical phenomena' (p. 25) that comprised the workings of colonialism in the regional setting of Victoria, this collection contributes to the important work of comprehending the unsettled histories of settler colonialism and its enduring legacies more widely.

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