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BOOK REVIEW

Grounding governance

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Much has been written about the history of Indigenous people in Victoria in the decades following self-government. These essays build on this work to deepen understandings of the mechanisms underpinning settler governance in this seminal context. Broadly grouped around three themes – cultures of knowledge and ethnography, bureaucratic and legislative frameworks, and governing the everyday – they deal with actors in a range of sites. Members of parliament and its statutory board are at the core of power, but the work of ethnographers, missionaries and photographers informed, and was informed by, developing strategies of government. One of the major contributions of the volume is its tracing of the intimate personal and ideological ties between these sites of power.

In the decade and a half between the late 1860s and the mid-1880s, two major laws were passed, six mission stations and government reserves created, a number of inquiries and commissions convened, influential volumes of ethnography were published, and a slew of reports, paintings, photographs, newspapers, letters and petitions were produced. This volume not only deploys these sources to explain how governance happened, it asks how their production assisted in making Aboriginal people governable. The central paradox it addresses is how the desire to ‘protect’ Aborigines from the violence inherent in settler colonialism came to introduce forms of institutional violence.

The editors situate their work in recent debates on the writing of settler colonial history. In their introduction, Leigh Boucher and Lynette Russell discuss the importance of being alert to historical contingency while recognising deeper patterns. Noting that settlers were proud to have made Victoria ‘a laboratory of colonial governance’ (4), they ask: was Victoria exceptional or emblematic? Addressing this question directly in a concluding chapter, Jessie Mitchell and Ann Curthoys synthesise governance in the other colonies to show how they were all different. In Victoria, however, the combination of early and rapid colonisation, the lingering influence of the protectorate of the 1840s, the rise of a new scientific metropolitan culture in the 1850s and strong Indigenous leadership led to an interventionism that was unusual at this time.

The book is clearly organised and the chapters unfold to create a coherent narrative argument. In the first Lynette Russell subverts settler assumptions about begging, to argue that for Aboriginal people this was a viable and enduring form of economic engagement in
a shifting economic landscape or ‘econoscape’. She argues their economic engagements complicate the domination/resistance dichotomy, and suggests the importance of reciprocity in Aboriginal people’s understandings of these encounters.

Rachel Standfield’s essay bridges the protectorate of the 1840s and the board of the late 1870s, showing how one influential text reflected and reinforced the increasing power of racism over that time. Robert Smyth Brough’s *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878), published when he was chairman of the board, was ostensibly intended to preserve the first-hand observations of Protector William Thomas, but it excised significant cultural detail and evidence of Aboriginal people’s resistance. In his chapter explaining the genesis of Australia’s first Aboriginal Protection Act of 1869, Leigh Boucher traces the failure of previous legislative attempts, laying bare the complex shifts in evangelical and ethnographic language over ‘an Aboriginal future’ (78) that underpinned the passage of this powerful Act.

Samuel Furphy probes contests within the board, focussing on how it was taken over by a ‘little family’ of squatting interests from the mid-1870s, bringing alive their friendship and kinship connections, providing pertinent detail of how they gained the ascendancy, and showing how their legacies lived on, not only in the ‘Half-Caste’s Act’ of 1886, but in the volumes of ethnography that reflected their ‘general disdain’ (113) for Aboriginal culture. Jane Lydon’s systematic analysis of the work of photographers Enrico Gigliioni and Anatole von Hugel ‘as Darwinism took hold among the global scientific community’ (139) shows not only how their work shaped and was shaped by racism but how it worked to assist the board in the passage of the 1886 ‘Half-Caste Act’.

Two essays focus on missions and reserves. Claire McLisky provides a synthesis of their history, drawing out variegations in their practices but arguing for the importance of their location under the over-arching reach of law. Joanna Cruickshank and Patricia Grimshaw trace the lives of two Indigenous and two white women, on and off the missions, concluding that the mission was ‘a profoundly inequitable environment’: ‘as in many human relationships, real affection could exist alongside condescension, resentment, deception and open conflict’ (181). The final essay outlines a collaborative project that seeks to link past, present and future by bringing to contemporary theatre audiences the ‘Minutes of Evidence’ given by Indigenous people to the 1881 Inquiry on Coranderrk.

A couple of essays show signs of hasty preparation but most are finely crafted. The volume is a welcome contribution to the rich scholarship emerging from ANU Press and Aboriginal History Inc.