

Settler Society in the Australian Colonies: Self-Government and Imperial Culture

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Angela Woollacott's new book is a good example of the ways in which Australian historians are being influenced by recent approaches to British imperial history. Just as importantly it shows how the interests of scholars working in these hitherto largely separate fields have converged. This is most obvious, as is the case here, in research into the origins, nature and legacies of settler colonial societies, particularly in their relations with indigenous people. In some senses, this has been a catching-up by imperial historians as approaches derived from cultural studies, gender history and post-colonial theory started to make their impact. At the same time it shows how far Australian history itself has become 'post-colonial'. In part, this was because of the same influences, but just as importantly it was due to the historiographical revolution inspired by the pioneering work of scholars like Henry Reynolds and Charles Rowley on the history of race relations in Australia.⁽¹⁾ Obsolete assumptions about a largely benign colonisation process were jettisoned; indigenous Australians and the frequently violent history of their dispossession became visible again. This revolution is the local intellectual hinterland of Woollacott's work. But the insights it offers are enriched by themes taken from the 'new' imperial history, including colonial knowledge, communication and mobility; imperial networks and their flows; hybridity; and constructions of gender on the colonial frontier. The book's argument is about the connections between each of these.

The study focuses on the period between 1820 and 1860, which Woollacott sees as 'foundational ... in Australian history, arguably at least as important as Federation' (p. 2). During these decades pastoralists rapidly invaded the continent's southeast, extending into what would become the colonies of Victoria and Queensland; new settlements were established in Western Australian and South Australia; the inflow of free settlers accelerated and, from the 1840s in particular, the proportion of convicts and ex-convicts in the colonial population steadily diminished. Convict society turned into settler society. The culmination of these events, described as a 'maturation' (p. 191) (the organic metaphor is striking here), was the introduction of responsible government in the eastern colonies during the 1850s (in Western Australia the event was delayed until 1890). This, of course, was self-government by and for the settlers themselves, 'the pivotal development' (p. 6) around which the entire study turns. Yet, despite the significance of these decades, Woollacott argues (a little unconvincingly given the work of social historians like Ken Inglis and Alan Atkinson) that we know little about how the settlers viewed the emergence of their own society or what they

understood of their place in the world.⁽²⁾ The colonial society they had created by 1860, she concludes, was the product of several influences operating in different parts of the continent and its associated islands, most notably the settlers' knowledge – tacit as well as articulated – of their sometimes peaceful, often violent, interactions with Aborigines; their gendered and racialized conceptions of manhood and what it meant to be a 'free white settler'; dependence on a heterogeneous workforce of unfree labour; knowledge of, and reactions to, events in other parts of the world; and finally mobility within the colonies and the British Empire at large. In many respects Woollacott's moves well beyond Inglis's now somewhat dated work, although certainly not Atkinson's recent publications. But unlike the latter, whose three-volume history of 'common imagination' in Australia from 1788 to 1914 is *sui generis* ⁽³⁾, Woollacott positions herself self-consciously in contemporary historiographical debates about settlerism, settler colonialism, and identity. Her main interest is in the second of these. But she also takes up David Lambert's argument about creolization in colonial Barbados in the early 19th century and finds strong parallels in Australia.⁽⁴⁾ I thought her argument in this instance was suggestive rather than fully worked out, but the point here is that Woollacott views Australia's settler society in these wider contexts, conceiving it as unique but subject also to global influences.

Apart from an introduction and a brief conclusion, there are seven chapters. The method is to juxtapose case studies of individual colonists or family groups to highlight the links between the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of colonial society. Chapter one, 'Settler family networks, imperial connections', as the title suggests, takes as its starting point recent approaches to the British Empire as a networked space through which people, information and ideas moved in multiple directions, generating connections and mutual influences thereby.⁽⁵⁾ Here Woollacott wants to show how the outlook and experiences of settlers from British military and administrative backgrounds in places as varied as Mauritius, Canada, the Caribbean and India continued to affect their attitudes and behaviour once they came to Australia. Using the examples of three related family networks – the Dumaresqs, Macleays and Darlings – she emphasises both the land hunger that characterised this class of settler and their earlier exposure to racially-stratified societies and forms of unfree labour. These settlers, Woollacott argues, had acquired 'knowledge on which they drew in shaping settler society in the southern colonies' (p. 28). Moreover, their military and naval backgrounds (many had converted half-pay to land grants) contributed to the 'militarisation' of colonial society, predisposing them, as in the case of Henry Dumaresq, to accept the use of force against indigenous people.

The second chapter, 'Systematic colonization: from South Australia to Australind', shifts attention to another family network, the Wakefields, whose best-known member Edward Gibbon advocated the closer settlement of colonies through controlled land sales, assisted migration, and the formation of compact rural communities. In Australia, his ideas inspired the creation of a new colony in South Australia in 1836 and the small settlement of Australind in Western Australia in 1840. Citing the postscript in *A Letter from Sydney* (1830), in which Wakefield proposed that non-white indentured labour might be employed in the Australasian colonies, Woollacott argues that as late as the mid-19th century the British did not necessarily regard settler colonies as essentially different from plantation settlements or colonies governed directly by the Crown. This proposition is reinforced by a survey of the variety of labour forms used in Western Australia, South Australia and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), including Chinese indentured workers, Indian servants and, most commonly, Aborigines. The plans of Australind's promoters for close links with India (the settlement's name was a contraction of Australia and India) are similarly used to undermine 'assumptions that the white-settler colonies such as in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia were seen as categorically different from the mercantile colonies in India, at least in the early to mid-nineteenth century' (p. 51). The implication appears to be that notions of racial hierarchy were part of the original DNA of Australia's settler society. Yet, if I am correct about this, it would be just as interesting to ask how far, under the influence of the Wakefieldians themselves, settler colonies *did* come to be seen as categorically different during the 1830s and 1840s. The acute labour shortages of the 1840s and early 1850s may indeed have confused the issue for some pastoralists in Australia, even though that shortage rather than any hankering for racial hierarchy was the most obvious operative factor. But it is equally telling that, even in Woollacott's account, indentured workers on the scale once trailed by Wakefield were never part of the original schemes

for South Australia and Australind, or subsequently acceptable to the majority of colonists themselves.

The next two chapters develop the book's core arguments about the nexus between racial hierarchy, notions of masculinity, and the basis of the settlers' claims for political rights and self-government. In these and other chapters, Woollacott wants to shift attention away from the conventional historiographical focus on political movements in Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart to influences emanating from the pastoral districts and to knowledge, experience and arguments originating in other parts of the Empire. Chapter three, 'Settler men as masters of labour: convicts and non-white workers', takes up the earlier discussion of racially-mixed and coerced labour. It suggests two things: first, that the distinctive pattern of labour relations on the pastoral frontier gave rise to a masculine discourse about the 'free white settler'; second, that this racially-conditioned notion of the free white settler was part of 'the full meaning' (sic) of the gendered language of 'manly independence and virtue' (p. 96) that the colonists used to articulate their claim to self-government. Chapter four, 'Responsible government in an imperial context' develops this argument in two further ways. First, the colonists' claims to political rights are also tied to a claim to control the land which derived from the dispossession of indigenous people and was equally expressed in gendered terms. Second, Woollacott uses the English philosophic radical Henry Chapman, who entered politics in Victoria in the 1850s, to illustrate the external imperial influences on the campaign for self-government (Chapman had previously lived in Canada and served as a colonial judge in New Zealand) and to show how Wakefieldians formulated their arguments for responsible government in terms of the settlers' 'exemplary masculinity'. Exemplary masculinity demonstrated the colonists' 'maturity and readiness for self-government' (p. 115). Critically, for Woollacott, its source was located by Chapman in the status of settler men as masters of non-white and indigenous labour.

Chapter five, 'Settler women, work, and debating the gender of citizenship', balances the preceding chapter by showing how women challenged the notion that political citizenship was exclusively masculine. It is about the ways in which colonial women joined in discussions about their political exclusion, rights and roles; participated in civil society; and had access to a variety of employments. The two key case studies are of the migration advocate and humanitarian Caroline Chisholm, who gave public lectures on a variety of topical issues in Sydney in 1859–61, and the feminist Catherine Helen Spence, whose early novels dealt with the positions of, and opportunities for, women in colonial society. As in previous chapters, Woollacott is at pains to show the connections between the colonies and the rest of the world. Chisholm serves as a further reminder of the movement of settlers with military backgrounds from India to the Australian colonies (her husband was a Captain in the East India Company army); while the colonial press is again highlighted as a source of news and ideas from abroad.

In chapter six, 'Frontier violence and political manhood', Woollacott returns to the association of the pastoral frontier, gendered identities and political citizenship. As I have already said, it is important for her to show how civil society in the towns was exposed to, and implicated in, the violence of the frontier. Starting with a criticism of Russell Ward's blindness to frontier violence in his classic study of the origins of colonial notions of national character (6), Woollacott identifies 'another unacknowledged Australian legend' that the urban movement for political reform was isolated from 'the messy realities of the frontier' (p. 154). Those realities were characterised by pervasive violence perpetrated by different social groups, including bushrangers (i.e. outlaws), semi-military police forces of a variety of descriptions, and pastoralists. Whatever the racial origins or social status of the perpetrator, violence was inseparable from constructions of masculinity. One part of Woollacott's argument is about what was *known* in the towns, particularly in government circles. Here she focuses on the reports of the Crown Lands Commissioners, which pointed 'to the likelihood that those who were pushing for self-government were hardly innocent about the frontier' (p. 161), including the existence of violence against Aborigines. This example, incidentally, appears to conflate those who actually governed and those who aspired to govern themselves. Much of the rest of the chapter is a case study of Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, who initially occupied land in northern New South Wales (later Queensland) and participated in the reprisals against Aborigines after the killing of the Fraser family at Hornet Bank station in 1857. Murray-Prior was the father of the novelist Rosa Praed, who is an important source. In 1861, he joined the Queensland civil service and soon after became postmaster-general and then a

government minister. Murray-Prior is evidence of how the proclivity to use force could be incorporated into conceptions of settler masculinity and, in turn, how the acceptability of violence passed into colonial culture at the highest political levels, creating 'a cultural congruence between respectability, acts of violence, and political authority' (p. 175).

The final chapter, 'The Australian colonies and imperial crises: the Indian "Mutiny" and the "Maori Wars"' shows how the settlers understood and justified their treatment of indigenous people in the light of interracial conflicts in other parts of the Empire. Together with the historians of what Andrew Dilley calls the 'small' British world, Woollacott emphasises the settlers' deep attachment to the Empire, but also follows Catherine Hall in stressing how this was an empire in which notions of racial difference and hierarchy were becoming hardened.⁽⁷⁾ Thus the violent British reprisals against the Sepoys in India could be used to justify the settlers' own reprisals against Aborigines after of the Hornet Bank killings, and the re-assertion of imperial control on the sub-continent – coming when the colonists themselves were asserting their right to govern the Australian continent could be interpreted as legitimising their own dispossession of indigenous people. Conversely, while imperial policy elsewhere could be seen to exonerate the colonists and validate their actions, local experience was the lens through which they viewed racial conflict elsewhere, allowing them to identify with India's British rulers and similarly land-hungry settlers in New Zealand.

It is impossible even in an extended summary like this to re-trace all the ground covered by Woollacott, but I hope I have said enough to show how her book focuses on a clear set of propositions about the dominant influences on settler society in Australia to the end of the 1850s. By doing so she has brought the Australian experience into the mainstream of settler colonial studies, drawing on a large body of recent research to cast the antipodean colonies in a new and sometimes provocative light. The nearest equivalent I know of is Alan Lester's study of colonial culture and practice in the Eastern Cape in roughly the same period.⁽⁸⁾ The two books complement each other and deserve to be in the same reading lists. Woollacott's arguments about the deeper cultural influences of racial violence during the pastoral age are important and deserve further attention. My main reservations are about the conclusions that can be drawn from what are, ultimately, a limited set of case studies. There is relatively little about urban experience, and even less about the cultural impacts of the large-scale assisted migration of the 1830s and 1840s or the more dramatic population inflows during the gold rush era itself. How town residents or immigrants were affected by 'creolization', by the 'militarisation' of early colonial society, or by constructions of manhood coming from the violent frontier remain open questions. Similarly, apart from the case study of Henry Chapman, there is no further analysis of how a racially-inflected discourse about the 'free, white settler' modified or interacted with the arguments about political rights or constructions of manly independence that originated elsewhere and in different experience. Even her reading of Chapman can be contested. The Wakefieldian prescription for settler self-government, as Woollacott herself is aware, predated its actual application in Australia and New Zealand and there is no reason to believe it was necessarily formulated with reference to race or labour relations. As far as the systematic colonisers were concerned, the mere fact of self-government alone was a desideratum if settlers were to be attracted who *already* possessed the necessary qualities of 'exemplary masculinity' needed to govern new societies. Wakefield himself argued in 1834:

The founders of a colony, which is to be governed by the colonists, are sure to enjoy a greater degree of consideration and importance among their companions, than they could reasonably have hoped to attain in the old society. *By the mere act of removing*, they become legislators and statesmen; the legislators and statesmen of a new country too, created, as it were, by themselves.

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Gendered arguments about fitness to govern may indeed have been modified by the experience of the pastoral frontier. But, for the most part, there is insufficient evidence and analysis in Woollacott's book for the relationship to be securely established on this basis alone.

These reservations notwithstanding, Woollacott has written a stimulating and thought-provoking study of the

nature and dynamics of settler colonialism in the southern colonies. It sets an agenda for new research and will prompt historians to re-examine many of their assumptions about colonial society in Australia.

Notes

1. For a spirited introduction, Ann Curthoys, 'We've just started making national histories and you want us to stop already?', in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette M. Burton (Durham, NC ; London, 2003), pp. 70–89.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ken Inglis, *Australian Colonists: An Exploration of Social History 1788–1870* (Melbourne, 1974); Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History. Volume 2, Democracy* (Melbourne, 2004), which covers 1820 to 1870.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. As well as volume 2 cited above, *Volume 1, The Beginning* (Melbourne, 1998) and *Volume 3, Nation* (Sydney, 2014).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Notably Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester, 2005) and *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge, 2006).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne, 1958).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Andrew Dilley, 'Empire, globalisation, and the cultural economy of the British World', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 14, (2012), 46; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Oxford, 2002).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London, 2001).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *England and America* (New York, NY, 1967), p. 327; my emphasis.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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