Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell have written an ambitious, detailed and wide-ranging book about government and Indigenous Australians in colonial Australia. They ask a number of questions about the connections between the two, including how the displacement of Indigenous Australians affected the ways in which colonists articulated their own claims to citizenship within Britain’s imperial system (claims, of course, that were already highly gendered). What, if any, continuities existed between the imperial and settler colonial regimes as far as Indigenous Australians were concerned; and, most importantly, what did the introduction of settler colonial government mean for Indigenous Australians in the mid-19th century.

Curthoys and Mitchell thus bring together two major bodies of scholarship, the first concerning the origins of settler self-government in Australia; the second, the rich historiography on Indigenous-settler relations during the 19th century. In doing so, they also draw on the work of historians like Catherine Hall, Alan Lester and Zoë Laidlaw, emphasising the many influences originating in Britain and other parts of the Empire that affected British policy towards Indigenous Australians; the movement to settler self-government; and how the colonists viewed themselves in relation to Aboriginal people and their acts of resistance. The result is a substantial study of both Australian and imperial history which will become the standard reference on the subject.

The book is divided into 16 chapters and four parts, excluding the introduction and conclusion. Throughout, detailed attention is given to each of the six colonies and, in the cases of Victoria and Queensland, the original districts from which they were formed. Part one (chapters one to five), covers the period of imperial government from 1830 to the mid-1840s, with a retrospective in the first chapter which reviews British policy since the beginning of white settlement. For Curthoys and Mitchell, the 1830s brought ‘a ferment of competing ideas and visions about colonial governance’ (p. 31). Their unifying theme is the conflict between Britain’s desire to promote colonisation and its wish also to give some protection to Indigenous people. These aspirations, of course, were mutually exclusive, which is why the British largely failed to reconcile them. Their efforts to prosecute settlers for killing Aborigines — most notoriously after the Myall Creek massacre in 1838 — and to act on the recommendations of the Select Committee on Aborigines in British
Settlements (1836–7) by appointing Protectors of Natives were stubbornly resisted by the colonists. The settlers did not believe Aborigines were entitled to either justice or protection, but they also objected to having to pay for the Protectors from local revenue. Thus, from the late 1830s, the colonists’ resistance to imperial policy towards Indigenous Australians was linked to their demands for greater local autonomy and control of expenditure. As pressure to grant the settlers self-government rose, the imperial authorities themselves had to ask awkward questions about whether colonists could be trusted to govern Indigenous people.

Part two (four chapters) deals with the transition to settler self-government in eastern Australia from the mid-1840s, including the residual imperial interest in Indigenous Australians, described as a ‘curious mix of British political disengagement, scientific interest, and royal connection’ (p. 235), after the colonists had taken responsibility themselves for the welfare of Aborigines. In this ten-year period, Curthoys and Mitchell argue, ‘the long-standing tension between the British policies of settler colonisation and Aboriginal protection was … resolved decisively in favour of the former’ (p. 155). While Secretaries of State, like Earl Grey, persisted with their efforts to safeguard the welfare of Indigenous Australians, these were counterbalanced by the imperial government’s desire to retain settler support and economise on colonial administration. Two decisions had fateful consequences. The first was Grey’s determination that Indigenous Australians could retain rights of access to Crown Land for subsistence. The second, in the mid-1850s, was Britain’s transfer to the settlers of control over land policy and the revenues arising from land sales. Even allowing for the later British attempt in Western Australia to legislate for a standing charge on colonial revenues to fund an Aborigines Protection Board, it is difficult to see what the imperial authorities could have done differently. Nevertheless, this decision marked Britain’s final surrender of any power to influence Indigenous policy in eastern Australia.

Part three (five chapters) concerns the various regimes imposed on Indigenous Australians by settler-colonial governments to roughly the end of the 1860s. ‘Regime’ is not a term Curthoys and Mitchell generally use, but arguably it is as a more appropriate term than ‘policy’, which might imply an acknowledgement of responsibility for Indigenous Australians which often simply did not exist. Crudely summarised, Curthoys and Mitchell describe three regimes, among which only the first involves an official acceptance of some obligation to Aborigines. These were: protection and institutionalisation on reserves and missions (Victoria and South Australia); policing, punishment, and extra-judicial killing (Queensland and, later, Western Australia – for which see part four); and indifference and neglect (Tasmania and New South Wales). The incidence of each was as much a function of the degree of settler occupation (regimes were most violent when Europeans were still occupying land) as of political culture, both of which factors are given due weight by Curthoys and Mitchell. The protection regime first established in Victoria was one way in which the imperial government’s humanitarian aspirations and administrative practices of the 1830s and 1840s survived, albeit in an attenuated form, into the second half of the 19th century. It involved increasingly invasive administrative control of Aboriginal people, including the separation of children, and eventually became the model adopted in most of the other colonies. Paradoxically, while institutionalisation and the establishment of reserves in Victoria created the possibility of some Indigenous dialogue with the colonial state, indifference to Aborigines in New South Wales appears to have created a space for Indigenous survival on, or close to, traditional lands, particularly when opportunities to work were available. That space, however, contracted when closer settlement led to more intensive farming and greater reliance on family labour.

Part four (two chapters) is devoted entirely to Western Australia, which remained a Crown Colony until 1890. Here, as in Queensland, a regime of policing, punishment, and killings prevailed in the colony’s far northwest, where isolation created a demand for Aboriginal labour in the pearling and pastoral industries. Geographical isolation also meant that those who directly benefitted from this labour were responsible for policing and legal administration. By the mid-1880s, the persistence and remarkable moral courage of one Anglican clergyman, John Gribble, had brought conditions in the northwest to international attention. As a result, the colonists had little choice but to accept the creation of an Aborigines Protection Board, which would remain accountable to the Governor, even after the colony became self-governing. A defined sum,
rising in proportion to the growth of public revenues, was also set aside to cover the Board’s expenditure. In practice, however, these measures served only to demonstrate how impossible it would be for the imperial authorities to retain any influence over Indigenous policy in a self-governing colony. The new government of Western Australia soon used its powers over policing and punishment to extend the control of Aboriginal people, including by reintroducing the flogging of Indigenous offenders in 1892. It also steadfastly opposed the Aborigines Protection Board and the standing charge on public revenue, both of which it succeeded in abolishing without interference from the Colonial Office in 1897.

Within this four-part structure, Curthoys and Mitchell follow a number of themes and topics through several chapters, including the experience of specific Indigenous communities, most notably those connected to Tasmania; the repeated efforts by Indigenous Australians to represent themselves in a variety of contexts, particularly during the Duke of Edinburgh’s visit to the colonies in 1887–8; questions of the admissibility of Aboriginal evidence in courts and the entitlement of Indigenous Australians to vote; the roles and mixed successes of Christian missions as they pursued their humanitarian and assimilationist goals; and the sharply contested terms in which the British authorities and the colonists formulated a sense of their own obligations to Aborigines. A constant undercurrent also is the emergence and consolidation of the discursive regime in colonial Australia which largely pre-empted the entire question of whether Indigenous Australians could have any political status or rights in a self-governing settler polity. Indigenous Australians were constructed as aboriginal — the most primitive of humankind; beyond assimilation, civilisation or conversion; lacking legitimate title to the land; doomed to extinction wherever Europeans settled. Such a discursive regime could have different outcomes. Aborigines might be dehumanised on the frontier or placed under protective care where the frontier had moved on, but they could never be allowed autonomy or self-determination. For the great majority of whites, such allowances were barely conceivable.

The great value of this study is that Indigenous Australians have become part of the history of government in Australia during the 19th century. In this Curthoys and Mitchell have achieved exactly what they set out to do. How far they have changed our understanding of the process by which settlers became self-governing is a different matter. Here it would be difficult to argue that the picture has fundamentally changed. Curthoys and Mitchell highlight the reservations held by British Secretaries of State, senior officials and the Aborigines Protection Society about the colonists’ fitness to govern Indigenous Australians. Yet, while there was hand-wringing in London, there is little to suggest — except in Western Australia — that imperial anxieties about Indigenous policy affected either the timing of events or the powers reserved by the British Government. Nor is it evident that the settlers considered their own obligations to Aborigines with any degree of seriousness when they created their constitutions during the 1850s. What Curthoys and Mitchell add, however, is their insistence that Indigenous Australians should be included in the political narrative of settler self-government and constitution-making. Moreover, the book’s argument is just as much about the terms on which the colonists formulated their original claim to self-government as how that claim was realised. Here Curthoys and Mitchell follow Angela Woollacott in her recent study of the origins of settler-colonial society in Australia. From the 1830s, the colonists asserted that they were entitled to govern themselves because they had successfully possessed and civilised the land. Implicitly, however, the colonists were also arguing about the success with which they had dispossessed its original Aboriginal inhabitants. This, at least, is the contention: ‘Their rights were grounded not only on being British, but also in being British settlers, who had displaced and replaced Indigenous people’ (p. 122). Bringing civilisation first meant clearing away the uncivilised. Curthoys and Mitchell have written a fine book which sets the standard for others.

Notes

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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