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Urbanizing frontiers: Indigenous peoples and settlers in 19th-century pacific rim cities [Book Review]

Abstract

In Australia, classical notions of the frontier and its associated histories of invasion, displacement and violence would tend to point us towards the outback or the bush rather than the urban centres where most of us live today. Penelope Edmonds thoroughly unsettles this notion of a distant frontier by moving it back to the edges of the continent, to the port towns where Europeans first landed and where most of them remained. The frontier was not simply 'out there', synonymous with the unruly boundaries of an expanding pastoral economy, but very close to home. This reorientation recognises that our cities were indigenous spaces from the time of European settlement and, in turn, it understands 'Aboriginal histories as urban histories' (p. 238). It also challenges more conventional accounts in which Aboriginal people 'exit the scene' in the early nineteenth century, only to return to urban areas as 'new migrants' in the twentieth century.

Keywords

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In Australia, classical notions of the frontier and its associated histories of invasion, displacement and violence would tend to point us towards the outback or the bush rather than the urban centres where most of us live today. Penelope Edmonds thoroughly unsettles this notion of a distant frontier by moving it back to the edges of the continent, to the port towns where Europeans first landed and where most of them remained. The frontier was not simply 'out there', synonymous with the unruly boundaries of an expanding pastoral economy, but very close to home. This reorientation recognises that our cities were indigenous spaces from the time of European settlement and, in turn, it understands 'Aboriginal histories as urban histories' (p. 238). It also challenges more conventional accounts in which Aboriginal people 'exit the scene' in the early nineteenth century, only to return to urban areas as 'new migrants' in the twentieth century.

But *Urbanizing Frontiers* does more than this. In the recognition that these themes are not unique to Australia, Edmonds places the early colonial history of her case study, Melbourne, in dialogue with Victoria, British Columbia, to produce a comparative and transcolonial analysis of two sites at the 'edges of empire'. Melbourne and Victoria are valuable comparative case studies because both cities were built on indigenous lands, both were imagined as Empire's Edens, 'lights of civilisation and Britishness on the Pacific Ocean' (p. 20), and both were vital economic hubs in expanding imperial webs, remade by gold rushes and migration. Yet they differed in several fundamental ways. In Canada indigenous people were more fully integrated into the fur trade, whereas in Australia the pastoral economy marginalised Aboriginal people on their own land. Melbourne began life as an 'illegal, outlaw settlement' (p. 79), whereas the mercantilist influence of the Hudson's Bay Company, the 'colonizing power by proxy' in Victoria (p. 102), kept renegade settlers in check. Approaches to treaty-making diverged in both places, as did attitudes towards and patterns of interracial intimacy between white men and indigenous women. Ultimately, Edmonds concludes, there was a more favourable colonial impression of aboriginal people in British Columbia because white settlers were far more dependent on them.

Yet, what is striking is the extent to which settler colonialism ultimately constructed indigenous people in both cities as 'inconvenient, anomalous, and vagrant' (p. 137). Edmonds makes a particularly productive reading of the contemporary power of Enlightenment stadial theory, where progress was intimately entangled with the human relationship to land. Cities were believed to stand at the pinnacle of social and cultural evolution; they represented 'the apotheosis of civilization' and 'became a synecdoche for empire and its ideological paradigm' (p. 61). In Pacific Rim settler colonies the ideological and material investment in new cities 'was explicitly racialized as the exclusive destiny of the Anglo-Saxon races' (p.

62). The original inhabitants of the soil were deemed out of place, a danger to health, order and governance. At the same time, the creation of cities created new spaces for aboriginal people, usually on the urban margins, and Europeans expected to see them living in their midst. In fact, they sought them out, and their motivations for doing so varied from spectacle to sex. By attending to the city as the scene of everyday life and not simply to the 'grand designs', Edmonds moves us beyond triumphant nineteenth-century accounts of New World urban development to interpret cities not so much as sites, but as processes – of land transactions, of mobility and its regulation, of interracial encounters, of the generation of knowledge about race, class and gender – processes, in sum, of 'the transformation and reordering of bodies and spaces'.

Urbanizing Frontiers is a fine example of comparative colonial history. This sort of history requires research in multiple locations often separated by vast distances, engagement with the historiographical contours of at least two countries, and a conceptual language to bridge them. The challenges of structure – where to begin, what to put next and what to omit – are magnified too, so in light of these methodological and technical challenges there is certainly much to admire here. There is some repetition in places and a tendency to overuse questions, but these do not detract from the rich and compelling evidence or the insightful analysis which is developed with reference to postcolonial, feminist and spatial theory.

Edmonds stresses that settler colonialism's urban histories were unique. Unlike the 'inward-looking protective cantonments' in established cities such as New Delhi, or the 'sequestered hill stations' in India (p. 65), settler colonial cities were large and expansive, envisioned as transimperial Anglo-Saxon cognate space: Melbourne and Victoria were both 'London reproduced'. The scale and vision of urban settlement and its relationship to the rural hinterlands in Australia and Canada was distinctive, yet I kept hearing echoes from elsewhere in the empire, particularly with respect to the relationship between indigeneity and urban space. In Fiji, for example, which was never envisaged as a white man's country, indigenous landownership was preserved under colonial rule, but, crucially, not in the port capital. Fijians were displaced from Suva and their presence there, along with a range of non-white 'others', was a continual source of debate and anxiety. Maybe we need to ask further questions about the racialisation of urban space *per se*, in whatever colonial context it comes. A wider comparative lens would be fascinating, one which embraces the connections between colonial formations we have more readily kept distinct. In the Pacific World this would mean bringing these settler outposts on the Rim in closer dialogue with the sea of islands that stretched in between. This would also entail a more extended discussion of the material networks that linked them through travel, technology, public speakers, newspapers and global performances, those things explored briefly in Chapter 7.

To reiterate, *Urbanizing Frontiers* is a sophisticated monograph, carefully crafted and impressive in scope. It deserves a wide readership in indigenous studies, colonial history, urban history and historical geography, while also making an important and timely contribution to both Australian and Canadian history. It

shows us the extent to which the urban histories shared by indigenous peoples and newcomers in the formative decades of the nineteenth century have left unfinished business in our postcolonial cities today.

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