

Facing Empire: Indigenous Experiences in a Revolutionary Age

Edited by Kate Fullagar and Michael A. McDonnell.

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In the opening piece in this extraordinary collection of essays, Bill Gammage discusses fire management in Indigenous communities in Australia. Almost as an aside, he comments that “of course you need to appreciate fire as a management tool before the use of no fire can be detected” (43). This profound but simple remark might be taken as a guiding statement for the collection and the worlds of interpretative possibilities that it opens up: which tools and techniques do we recognise in our approach to colonial histories? How can we learn to recognise what is missing when we don’t even really appreciate what is already visible and tangible? To what extent does our scholarship recognise the “fire” of Indigenous work, let alone comprehend what we’re looking at when we see no fire?

As Daniel K. Richter’s foreword emphasises, there is no one way of facing empire. Throughout the collection, we are given insights into the wide array of strategies with which Indigenous peoples globally engaged with the forces of empire, especially in the period before the British Empire became fully consolidated. From the Anishinaabe Odawa in the Great Lakes, to Māori in the southern part of Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean), Indigenous communities worked within their own protocols and values, adapted to the ways of invaders and colonisers, and charted a course that juggled land, trade, religion, culture, and water.

The diversity and complexity of the collection require sophisticated organising principles. There is always a danger in volumes such as this that the desire for some kind of unifying theme leads to a generalised notion of what is Indigenous, or a set of rather forced connections between peoples and historical moments that have very little in common. *Facing Empire* does an excellent job of letting the chapter authors focus on their specific areas, without offering a grand theory of indigeneity. The structure that is provided by the three sections in the volume—Pathways, Entanglements, and Connections—offers a figurative model of imagining connections that is far better suited to the topic than a temporal or geographical demarcation would have been. Appropriately, the selected terms emphasise relationships, good and bad, between Indigenous peoples and the peoples of empire, relationships that are still in force in the twenty-first century.

Kate Fullagar and Michael A. McDonnell’s introduction stresses a significant point about the volume’s aims: “we wanted to write histories of empire with Indigenous peoples as the *main* subjects” (4). It is a sad reflection on scholarship on the Revolutionary Age that this aim is genuinely revolutionary. While Indigenous scholars and knowledge keepers continue to record and remember these histories from their own perspectives, and their communities continue to live in the devastating aftermath of these events, settler and imperial history has too often remained mired in a unidirectional idea of empire that ignores the people on the other side of the council fire, the trading post, and the meeting table. By centring that experience, Fullagar, McDonnell, and their coauthors offer a priceless corrective to received histories in settler and imperial societies.

But *Facing Empire* is groundbreaking not simply for doing worthy corrective work; rather, its essays demonstrate how much knowledge is forgotten, concealed, and erased by our collective failure to do that work. Robert Kenny's essay on Taungurung responses to empire in Victoria uses the gorgeous phrase "Listening to the Silent Archive" to describe the necessary process, and the essays in this collection demonstrate just how innovative scholarship can be when we (and here my "we" refers to the white academy, of which I am a part) surrender the idea that we must be at the centre of everything. In part, that surrender helps remind us that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the European imperial powers were dealing with societies that were often considerably more successful than they were. Many of the groups discussed in the volume were not so much facing empire as mastering empire, at least for a time. In his sole-authored essay, McDonnell points out that the Odawa could have crushed the British easily, but found them useful, a point picked up by Rebecca Shumway in her discussion of Fante sovereignty in West Africa and the rather fragile hold that the British had on the region. Colin G. Calloway, meanwhile, reminds us that our knowledge of the eventual outcome of settler violence in North America should not blind us to the fact that there was a point "when Indigenous foreign policies trumped imperial ambitions, and when Indigenous power shaped imperial outcomes and threatened the future of the United States" (145). That same surrendering of European and settler centrality means that relatively straightforward Indigenous ideas can occupy the spotlight and demonstrate their innovative potential. Jennifer Newell's marvellous chapter, "New Ecologies: Pathways in the Pacific, 1760s–1840s," for example, stresses the agency of nonhuman participants in life in the Pacific, "meeting the newcomers with welcome or resistance, as situations demanded" (91), while Joshua L. Reid points out the centrality of marine space, not simply land, to Indigenous life and imperial encounters.

When the essays do set out a comparative or global reading of Indigenous experiences, they offer something far more robust than a vague gesture towards a pan-Indigenous reading. Sujit Sivasundaram's "Closed Sea or Contested Waters? The Persian Gulf in the Age of Revolution" is perhaps the best example of this approach, in its emphasis on the strategic spaces that fed into the imperial story and the ways in which indigeneity could be "a changeable category of belonging and classification" in the imperial world (116). By moving the discussion beyond the settler colonies, or the extractive colonies in Africa and India, this essay provides an important global perspective on the questions the volume raises. So too do Kate Fullagar's and Elspeth Martini's essays, each of which focus on London, but make Indigenous diplomats the focus of their discussion, linking the imperial metropolis with the homelands of Indigenous peoples without prioritising London as a centre.

These reframings matter not simply because they ask us to understand history correctly, nor because they open up new avenues of thought and scholarship, but rather because we continue to inhabit the Revolutionary Age. The cost of empire is still being borne by Indigenous communities; as Shino Konishi's afterword points out, *Facing Empire* offers "a deeper understanding of the imperial–Indigenous relationships forged during the earlier stages of British expansion, and why it was so heartbreaking when these historic treaties and promises were eventually broken. Such a history also provides rich insights into why Indigenous demands for the return of land, sacred sites, and restitution and social justice are still so heartfelt today" (336). Indigenous communities will also bear the brunt of the environmental catastrophe of climate change, a catastrophe largely ushered in by the imperial ambitions of the eighteenth century and the resource extraction required to fulfil those ambitions. Just as we need to surrender the scholarly space, it is time to surrender political space and recognise the point that

Gammage's essay makes so eloquently: there's a time for fire, and a time for no fire, and that balance is required to maintain abundance. While *Facing Empire* is an invaluable resource for historians, it deserves a wider readership because of its uncompromising insistence on Indigenous autonomy, sovereignty, and the global lessons of "Indigenous experiences in a Revolutionary Age."