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Elizabeth Elbourne is an accomplished, eminent historian whose reputation was forged by deeply researched articles on the nineteenth-century Cape Colony and solidified by the magisterial *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853*, published in 2002. As the title of this book suggests, her treatment of the local history of empire was always embedded within an imperial context. And in this new, equally substantial monograph, Elizabeth Elbourne has extended her reach beyond the Cape and Britain to include the historical experiences of North America and Australia in the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Her focus is on the way family and kinship networks informed the administration and policies of empire from the 1770s to the 1840s, a period that bridged the imperial formations of the early modern period to the fully-formed empire of the mid-Victorian era. At first glance, it might seem that to concentrate on family would imply a narrower focus than her earlier work. In reality, this focus demanded a wide angle of vision and a deep dive into scattered and diverse archives. She has concentrated on three family groupings: the Johnson-Brant family who provided the imperial administration with its Indian agents in pre-Revolutionary North America and who, after 1776, re-located to play the same (but much reduced) role in Canada; the three Bannister brothers, Saxe, Thomas, and John, who wandered variously between London, North America, West Africa, New South Wales, and the Cape Colony as imperial administrators and sometime theorists of empire; and, finally, the Buxton-Gurney clan, leading Quaker advocates for the abolition of slavery, cozily ensconced in rural Norfolk but with ready access to the corridors of power at Westminster, and whose God-given purpose in life they believed was to insert a high-minded morality into British imperial policy.

With the exception of the Bannisters, the history of these family networks is well-trodden ground. There is an extensive literature on the Johnson-Brant family. Their network was a tightly knit, cross-race collection of intermarried Haudenosaunee Indians, white men and women who were both economic and political actors. They were intermediaries and negotiators who facilitated imperial rule in the Hudson and Mohawk valleys of New York, and who moved easily between the American backwoods and the well-tended drawing rooms of the British elite in London. They were essential brokers between Indigenous and imperial polities, and their intermediary status en-
abled Indigenous voices and priorities to be heard in imperial politics. As such, they signified the cross-cultural social formations that marked the North American empire until the Revolution introduced the steady seepage of the different racial policies of settler colonialism.

The Bannisters were an altogether different kettle of fish. They were near-perfect examples of James Mill’s remark that the British Empire was a vast system of outdoor relief for the British upper classes. The Bannisters were closer to sunken gentry than aristocracy, and their ability to access the spoils of empire was very limited. The three Bannister brothers were constantly and desperately seeking patronage appointments to rescue them from the ever-looming threat of financial disaster. Saxe Bannister served time in debtors’ prison. John Bannister was so eager to get to be chief justice of Sierra Leone that he willingly took passage in a leaky vessel whose crew mutinied not once, but twice against the risk of sailing in her. His reckless enthusiasm did him no good. He died of fever a few months after his arrival in Freetown. His brother, Thomas, wrangled a job in the Swan River colony and after a few years as a lowly official and would-be settler there, ended up as an acting sheriff in Van Diemen’s Land where he became an investor in the Port Philip Association, which aimed to establish a private colony in what was to become the Australian province of Victoria.

The third brother, Saxe, left the largest archival traces, which Elizabeth Elbourne has painstakingly tracked down over three continents. His government service was as attorney general of New South Wales between 1824 and 1826 where his performance as a tiresome meddler ensured that he was never again given a patronage appointment. But in New South Wales he deepened and extended a long-standing interest in Indigenous people that had earlier been sparked by a visit to North America. Thus, in Australia he was a spokesman for Aboriginal rights and was even prepared to prosecute settlers known to have killed Aboriginal people. But—and this illustrates the porosity of the moral categories of empire—he also advocated violence against Aboriginal peoples as a shock therapy to combat the disorder of the frontier. But in the later 1820s during his sojourn in the Cape Colony—where he landed after being dismissed from New South Wales—he collected evidence of the violence that was endemic against the Xhosa and others, and was a vocal advocate for an imperial policy that recognized Indigenous rights. On returning to London he worked to formulate a “humanitarian” policy for empire that he publicized in a stream of publications. These books are useful to historians because they reveal the mentality of early nineteenth-century humanitarianism, but they fell on increasingly deaf ears in the Colonial Office, as did Saxe’s perpetual claims for monetary compensation for his ill-treatment at the hands of the imperial establishment.

The success of the abolitionist movement allowed the Buxton-Gurney network to maintain its access to the corridors of power throughout the 1830s. They engineered and—thanks to female members of the clan—staffed the Select Committee on Aborigines, 1835-37. Their policy agenda in this period was to follow slave abolition with a policy of protection for Indigenous people. And in this they overlapped and reinforced the program that Saxe Bannister was proposing, although like the rest of the official world they kept him at a discreet distance. The credibility of the Buxton clan was ultimately destroyed by their advocacy of the Niger expedition of 1841, which they literally bullied the government into supporting. The objectives of this ill-fated enterprise neatly summarized the utopian vision of humanitarian imperialism itself. The expedition was designed to end the slave trade by negotiating commercial treaties with local chiefs. The expectation was that this would ignite the fires of modernity in the region, and replace the profitability of trade in people with trade in cotton goods, palm oil, and the like. When this ethereal fantasy was dissolved by the virtual anni-
hilation of the expedition from disease, the spell of Buxton-Gurney power was broken for all time.

The significance of these family groupings for the history of the British Empire lies primarily in what they reveal about the entangled themes of imperial power. Each network was involved in one way or another in Indigenous dispossession, cross-race relations and negotiations, imperial violence, and the dream of a “humanitarian” empire. These themes tend to get lost under the weight of historical detail in the book, and the connections to the emergence of settler colonial society, suggested in the title, are not always clear. But Elbourne’s book is important because it insinuates the peculiar contours of imperial power in this period. Her families manifested the personal exercise of power and policy, and the weak presence of a bureaucracy for empire. The most obvious example of this was how the Johnson-Brant clan carried virtually the sole responsibility for running Indigenous relations from the 1750s to the end of the American Revolution. But even the marginal Bannisters were linked in various personal relationships to significant members of the South African elite such as Donald Moodie and Thomas Pringle. The Buxton-Gurney clan—particularly its female members—served as experts on slaves and Indigenes in the imperial center. And the demise of all these groupings reflected the slow professionalization of the administration of Indigenous affairs. But for this earlier period—whose traces remained visible well into the 1830s and 1840s—these kinds of kinship networks served as experts and personnel of the sinews of imperial power. Indeed, although the importance of these kinship structures quickly eroded in North America after 1776, they reemerged elsewhere such as in New Zealand into the 1850s. Cross-race kinship networks were crucial to trade and to cultural and political negotiation between Maori and the settler presence. And this only changed—as it had in North America—once settler colonial society found its sure footing.

One important consequence of a reliance upon kinship networks was the space it allowed for Indigenous agency in the running of the empire. Naturally, the degree to which empire was shared or negotiated, varied greatly from place to place and time to time. It was not a stable construct, and it was most evident where Indigenous society was powerful and well developed, and where the imperial presence was correspondingly weak. In such situations, cross-race relations were central to managing and negotiating an imperial presence. This was the case with the Haudeno-saunee of New York, or the Anishinaabe of the upper Great Lakes, or later the Maori of New Zealand. Elbourne’s book highlights this aspect of imperial history and the fractures and violence that accompanied it. It thus serves as an important reminder that the hegemonic structures of empire emerged from an historical process, and were never a given fact. In a similar way, the process of Indigenous dispossession is also complicated by this book. In the North American case, for example, sovereignty claims between the Indigenous people and the imperial authority had as much to do with the American Indians’ desire to monetize their holdings through access to the land market as they did with securing Indigenous autonomy. This was true also in the early years of New Zealand, and in both places the imperial administration had to struggle to secure the ultimate sovereignty of the Crown over land sales.

Still, this more personal system of managing the empire was no more benign than its successor regimes. The “violence” in Elbourne’s title is not merely a nod toward the enormous damage that empire did to Indigenous societies. Violence was integral to Indigenous-imperial relations, and imperial management by family clan afforded no protection from it. Of course, as this book implies, the context of colonial violence demands attention. The violence surrounding the Brant-Johnson clan was both strategic and erratic in nature, sometimes intruding into the very heart of the family network itself, as the killing of Isaac Brant
by his own father rather dramatically illustrates. Saxe Bannister’s time in New South Wales and South Africa came at a moment when the imperial bureaucracy was beginning to acquire the will and the power to claim a monopoly on the use of violence. As attorney general in New South Wales, Bannister irritated Governor Darling with his frequent advocacy of martial law. But Bannister favored it as a way of ensuring a state monopoly of violence in the colony to be used as needed against both settlers and Aboriginal peoples. And once he was freed from government service in South Africa he devoted himself to exposing the endemic violence of the settler regime there.

For Bannister and the Gurney-Buxtons (who of course only read about imperial violence from the pastoral safety of rural Norfolk) violence was a problem that imperial policy should address. Bannister wrote at length about how this could be done, and the Buxton group were fully behind expanding the idea of protection (which had been part of slave policy) as a way of fencing Indigenous society off from the arbitrary, uncontrolled violence of settler culture. This did not mean that they expected Indigenous society to be preserved. They were convinced that the destiny of the Indigenous peoples of empire was to become more like the British—just as the British had progressed from painted savages to Christianized citizens. In that sense, they were as imperialist as most common settler. But the “humanitarianism” that Saxe Bannister and Gurney-Buxtons evoked was fundamentally at odds with the emergent politics of settler colonialism. These “humanitarians” were, in a sense, taking the lessons from the earlier phase of empire whose structures included some place for Indigenous agency. They wanted to adapt that impulse to the new realities where settlers existed in enough numbers to overawe the Indigenes, and thereby contain the genocidal tendencies that they recognized vibrated through settler colonialism. It is profoundly ironic that their humanitarian vocabulary and program would be appropriated by settler colonialism and become the main rhetorical device to justify the nineteenth-century British Empire. But nothing is every one thing in history, and the language of their humanitarianism also provided a vocabulary of anti-imperial ideology in Britain itself, and among the Indigenous peoples of the empire.

Like Elbourne’s previous work, this is a deeply researched, erudite book. It is full of fascinating detail. But, like most such books, it veers at times toward being overwritten. Her publisher would have served the book and its author well had they wielded a sharper red pencil. But, it is undeniably a book that provides much food for historical thought. Although the stories of the Buxton and Bannister families are interesting for their own sake, and are significant for the history of imperial ideas and policy, more important is the way family and kinship networks reflected a particular imperial historical formation at particular times and places. As I have suggested, this formation is most resonant in the North American case, but it could also be seen elsewhere as an example of the variety of shapes that empires could assume.
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