Creating White Australia

Edited by Jane Carey
and Claire McLisky
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Contributors

Leigh Boucher is a lecturer in the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University, Sydney. He is the co-editor (with Katherine Ellinghaus and Jane Carey) of *Re-orienting whiteness* (Palgrave, 2009) and is currently researching the relationship between historical writing, settler colonialism and political rights in the 19th-century British world.

Jane Carey holds a Monash Fellowship at Monash University where her current research explores the politics of population in British settler colonies. She is the co-editor (with Katherine Ellinghaus and Leigh Boucher) of *Re-orienting whiteness* (Palgrave, 2009) and has published articles in *Gender and History* and the *Women’s History Review*.


Joanna Cruickshank is a lecturer in history at Deakin University. She has published on 18th- and 19th-century religious history in Britain and Australia. Forthcoming publications include an article on the friendships of British Methodist women in the *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, a co-authored chapter (with Patricia Grimshaw) on Moravian missionaries in far north Queensland and a book on the 18th-century hymn writer Charles Wesley, to be published by Scarecrow Press in late 2009.

Fiona Davis is a postgraduate student in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her PhD thesis topic is ‘Black, white and shades of grey: the story of cultural exchange on Cummeragunja, 1900–1950’.

Patricia Grimshaw is a Professorial Fellow in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne, where for several decades she taught Australian and American history and contributed to the Gender Studies Program. She has written extensively on women's history, and engaged with the history of settler colonialism and whiteness studies. With Shurlee Swain and Ellen Warne, she is currently completing a book, ‘Balancing acts: working mothers in twentieth-century Australia’.

Jennifer Jones holds an ARC Post Doctoral Fellowship at the Australian Centre, School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her project examines rural women’s cross-racial collaboration in the Country Women’s Association of NSW during the assimilation era. Jennifer’s first book, *Black writers and white editors: episodes of collaboration and compromise in Australian publishing history*, was published by Australian Scholarly Publishing in 2009.

Claire McLisky is a white Australian woman descended from colonial-era Scottish and English settlers. She grew up on Bundjalung land in northern New South Wales. In early 2009 Claire was awarded her PhD in Australian history, from the University of Melbourne, with a thesis exploring faith, power and subjectivity in the lives of Protestant
missionaries Daniel and Janet Matthews. She has recently set off for two years travelling, living, and working overseas.

**Benjamin Mountford** is a Rae and Edith Bennett Travelling Scholar, reading for a DPhil in Imperial History at Exeter College, Oxford. His doctoral research examines the importance of 19th-century perceptions of China in shaping an Anglo-Australian understanding of the British Empire.

**Keir Reeves** is a Monash Research Fellow co-housed in the Tourism Research Unit and the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University. Keir is the exhibition reviews editor for *History Australia*, and an editorial board member of *Sporting Traditions*, and the Heritage Council of Victoria. He is a contributing co-editor of *Places of pain and shame: dealing with difficult heritage* (Routledge, 2009) and *Deeper leads: new approaches in Victorian goldfields history* (Ballarat Heritage Services, 2007).

During her studies at the University of Melbourne, **Maggie Scott** was inspired by lecturers such as Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Jane Carey to pursue research into historical and contemporary Indigenous resistance to colonialism, critical race theory and alternative narratives of history. In 2008 Maggie completed a thesis encompassing some of these interests in the story of William Buckley. She currently tutors ‘Writing Angles’ and ‘Popular Culture and the Moving Image’ at RMIT and is adapting her thesis into a screenplay.

**Shurlee Swain** is a professor at Australian Catholic University and a Senior Fellow in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne. She has written extensively on the history of women, children and welfare, and is currently completing a book with Patricia Grimshaw and Ellen Warne, ‘Balancing acts: working mothers in twentieth-century Australia.’
Marguerita Stephens was a working gardener before returning to study history at the University of Melbourne. Her PhD on race relations in colonial Victoria, with a close focus on the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, was awarded the Dennis-Wettenhall Prize for Research in Australian History, 2004. She holds a Research Fellowship in the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne and is a participant in the Manuscript Sponsorship Program at the University’s Writing Centre for Scholars and Academics.

Ellen Warne is a lecturer in history at Australian Catholic University where she teaches in a range of Australian and international history units. She has written on Christian women’s use of maternal activism to achieve political aims in 19th- and early 20th-century Australia, and is currently completing a book with Shurlee Swain and Patricia Grimshaw, ‘Balancing acts: working mothers in twentieth-century Australia’.
Trans/national history and disciplinary amnesia: historicising White Australia at two fins de siècles

Leigh Boucher, Macquarie University

What should … form the field of history? … States and politics will be the chief part of its subject, because the acts of nations and of the individuals who have played a great part in the[ir] affairs have usually been more important.

Besides the thirty-five millions of the United Kingdom, there is in America and the British colonies and dependencies an English-speaking population of nearly seventy millions, who form … virtually one people with the inhabitants of the old country [and history should] appeal to an audience of the whole race.¹

(White) Australia has a problem with its past. As the venom in the recent ‘history wars’ suggests, these problems aren’t produced by a straightforward tussle over historical truth; these cultural battles were energised by contestations over the meaning of that past in and for the present.² Indeed, current questions about identity, belonging and territorial entitlement inevitably underpin our historical engagements. In concrete ways, the historical stories we tell bind present-day communities together, police their boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and legitimate their territorial claims. Moreover, there is little question that,

² On the contours of the ‘history wars’ see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, The history wars (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2004).
culturally speaking, the nation functioned as the dominant category of 20th-century historical consciousness in the Anglophone world; these battles were thus inevitably shaped by the culturally-naturalised ideologies of nationalism.³

As Benedict Anderson reminds us, however, nation-states rely on the collective imagination of communities; by implication, historians should be wary of the ways in which our disciplinary practice neatly discerns the origins of these contemporaneous communities in the past.⁴ Regardless of our claims to empirical voracity, professional historical practice is, at the very least, epistemologically implicated in the framing of these political dynamics. Academic historians have been similarly bound by a ‘narrative contract’ with the nation-state for much of the discipline’s history. Thus in a moment of disciplinary ‘birth’ in 1886, the English Historical Review directed the nascent profession to discern the acts of nations as its fundamental project.⁵

Furthermore, in settler-colonial states like (white) Australia, historians might do well to rethink the nation-making imperatives of our territorially-bounded writings because the territorially-possessive logic of settler (national) identity seems incompatible with an acknowledgment

³ I don’t want to enter the muddy debate about the ‘character’ and ‘origins’ of nationalism as an ideological formation. However, importantly, most theorists and historians of nationalism suggest that a crucial character of nationalism is a claim on territorial possession and legitimate sovereignty by a ‘people’. Most importantly, these ‘people’ (and their correlative territorial claims) are buttressed by historical narratives. As Eric Hobsbawm writes, ‘my profession, which has always been mixed up in politics, becomes an essential component of nationalism … because nations without [history] are a contradiction in terms’. Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘Ethnicity and nationalism in Europe today’, Anthropology Today 8.1 (1992): 3–8.
of continuing (Ab)original sovereignty. If the (white) Australian nation and its imagined community are necessarily given foundation by the mythic legitimacy of settler territorial expropriation, does writing national histories in the present inevitably uphold these (il)legitimacies? Indeed, in many ways Indigenous histories represent an historiographic paradox; the category of (Ab)original Australians functions as a constant reminder of the wholesale theft that underpins the Australian nation-state. It’s no coincidence that the doomed race theory was at its height around the time of federation. It safely (dis)placed (Ab)original Australians in the pre-historical past; the remaining Indigenous population became a temporal ‘remnant’ with no place in the historicised national present and future. Whilst the inclusion of (Ab)original voices into Australian history from the 1970s addressed the great (white) Australian silence, the ensuing ‘history wars’ suggest that this incorporation opened a serious epistemological rift. In these contexts, wars about ‘our’ national history, then, are less than surprising. If historical writing answers past and present questions about who belongs where, Australian History—the story of European conquest and national emergence—is always going to struggle to escape the expropriating dynamics of settler colonialism.

Thinking transnationally about the past, then, offers a tempting solution to these problems because it seems to reframe the boundaries of

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7 Drawn from Bain Attwood, Telling the truth about Aboriginal history (Crow’s Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 11–35.
8 On the ‘doomed race’ theory in Australia, see Russell McGregor, Imagined destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the doomed race theory (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997). I thank Alison Holland for a hallway discussion that made me think about the relationship between federation and the disavowal of Aboriginal futures.
historical knowledge. Might the geographic loosening of the narrative contract between historians and the nation-state take some of the territorially-possessive venom out of national ‘history wars’? Indeed, in recent decades, nationally-bounded historical writing has begun to look methodologically and politically suspect from a number of disciplinary fronts; various national ‘history wars’, challenges to national exceptionalisms, global frames of vision, and postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric discourses of national self-realisation have all fractured the epistemic accords that contracted historians to the nation-state. In these contexts, tracing transnational circulations of ideas, capital and bodies in the past seems an attractive project. By unmaking the historical inviolability and inevitability of the nation-state, transnational historians make a compelling case for their methodological and political utility and the profession itself is certainly taking on a more transnational temper.

In this chapter I would like to suggest that transnational history’s apparent potential to address myriad political and methodological malaises is only made possible by a serious case of disciplinary amnesia. Indeed, the transnational turn has in no small way been energised by repeated critiques of national historiography as a ‘toxic’ product of Eurocentric nation-making in the 19th century. This turn, I would like

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10 Marilyn Lake, for example, suggests that transnational ‘thinking’ can directly address the ways in which ‘Australian history has conscripted the past into the service of the nation’. Marilyn Lake, ‘On history and politics’, in The historian’s conscience: Australian historians on the ethics of history, ed. Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004), 96.


12 ‘Toxic product’ from Patrick J. Geary, The myth of nations: the medieval origins of Europe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 15. Even Catherine Hall, in her vital project that brings the empire into the birth of English national history in the 19th century, maintains the territorial coherence of the nation-state. Empires and colonialism matter, for Hall, insofar as they made and remade the boundaries between the (national) metropole and the (colonial) periphery. Catherine Hall, ‘At home with history’, in At home with the Empire,
to suggest, relies on an historiographic genealogy that disowns a range of 19th-century trans-territorial historical writings. Indeed, as White Australia was geopolitically made, many historians (both in Britain and the colonies) sought to understand this outpost of whiteness—and its colonial origins—in what now look like transnational terms. Whilst the first edition of the *English Historical Review* might have asserted the centrality of the ‘nation’ to historical writing, ideas about trans-territorial racial communities and audiences were similarly prominent in the moment of the discipline’s birth. Even as the *Review* attempted to centralise the nation, the ways in which imperialism had produced an imagined ‘transnational’ audience refused to disappear entirely from the frame of vision.¹³ We are not the first historians to think transnationally about (white) Australia, and the absence of these early trans-territorial histories from our disciplinary genealogies is worrying.

Beginning with the range of ways in which national historical writing has been challenged in recent decades, I would first like to draw out the historiographic consensus that similarly structures the transnational turn, postcolonial critiques of national historiography, and recent considerations of the ‘history wars’. Secondly, I sketch a brief ‘counter-history’ of historical writing in the second half of the 19th century to suggest that, for many historians at this *fin de siècle*—in sharp contrast to our dominant narratives of disciplinary origin and birth—the nation-state wasn’t the only territorial container of historical knowledge. Indeed, for a range of writers across the settler periphery and metropole, modernity was signified by the global circulation of people and ideas; as the *EHR* asserted, the ‘whole race’ of ‘English speaking peoples’ had spread across the globe. As we are faced with our own globalising modernity, and the transnational analytic vocabulary seems to solve a series of nationally-produced dilemmas, we might do well to remember a

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¹³ ‘Prefatory note’.

series of historians who understood their own late-19th-century modernity—and the imperial expropriations that underwrote it—in similarly trans-territorial terms.

**Disciplinary genealogies and the transformative possibilities of transnational history**

Transnational historians suggest that historicising nationally necessarily involves the retrospective imposition of contemporaneous national sovereignties with concrete genealogical effects.\(^\text{14}\) Importantly, this critique functions on both political and empirical registers; framing the past in national terms involves isolating what are, in fact, empirically interconnected pasts and this imposition grants legitimacy to the territorial demands of nation-states in the present. These critiques offer compelling avenues to understand the political ferocity of nationalism and its historiographic discontents (like the eruption of ‘history wars’). Precisely because historical knowledge is a crucial balustrade of national belonging and entitlement, challenges to national historical narratives will necessarily be greeted by an ideological backlash. As numerous historians have subsequently argued, the animating problem in the ‘history wars’ seemed to be the threat that an emergent professional consensus about colonial exploitation posed to public historical narratives of territorial entitlement and national identity.\(^\text{15}\) Transnational history, then, promises to remake the discursive boundaries that made these wars possible (and, perhaps, inevitable). Moreover, a counternational turn is occurring at multiple historiographic sites—this turn only lends weight to its political and methodological promise.

\(^{14}\) On the emergence of transnational history see Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Connected worlds: history in transnational perspective* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006).

Postcolonial scholarship has long pointed out the ways in which national historical writing tends to mobilise both the temporal and territorial logics of colonialism. In western conventions of historical thought, Europe functions as the origin of modernity and non-western cultures are situated as ahistorical predecessors of modern national communities. Dipesh Chakrabarty thus suggests that because the discipline of history in the 20th century ‘universalize[d] the nation-state as the most desirable form of political community’, histories written about the former colonial periphery tended to assess the acquisition of this political status by colonised people in a metanarrative of liberal progress and national self-realisation.\(^{16}\) In historical terms, colonised peoples become modern at the moment they ‘achieve’ liberal nation-statehood.\(^{17}\)

In settler societies, these temporalising logics take on even more potency.\(^{18}\) If (post)colonial national history discerns the realisation of national independence as the unshackling of imperial dependence, the acknowledgement of the continuing colonial relationship between white Australia and its Indigenous peoples becomes a narrative impossibility. In this way, the continuing presence of Indigenous peoples haunts the peripheries of national historical consciousness as a destabilising force in narratives of national self-realisation and liberal accomplishment.\(^{19}\) It’s little wonder that most settler societies have been plagued by ‘history wars’ in the last few decades; Aboriginal political campaigns have, in their very existence, fractured the stubborn temporal and spatial demarcations


\(^{18}\) This point is made by Bain Attwood in ‘The paradox of Australian Aboriginal history’, *Thesis Eleven* 38 (1994).

\(^{19}\) See Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).
of late-20th-century (white) settler national historical knowledge.\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps, simply by surviving the onslaught of settler colonialism, Aboriginal Australians destabilise the historico-territorial myths of settler nationhood and ‘dispute the moral legitimacy of the nation-state’.\textsuperscript{21}

Historicising nationally doesn’t only present a problem in former colonial states; for many global historians there are serious implications to the segregation of modern history into national boundaries. In an apparently globalising world, historians have begun to consider the ways in which the global movement of people, ideas, and capital have a much longer history. Indeed, transnational history offers a powerful critique of the ways in which globalisation is frequently exceptionalised as a late-20th-century phenomenon.\textsuperscript{22} Debates about the impact (positive or otherwise) of globalisation on local cultures frequently pretend that national borders were virtually impenetrable for much of the 20th (and, indeed, 19th) century.\textsuperscript{23} With such ahistorical accounts of previous national inviolability stabilising both violently reactive nationalism and naively hopeful globalism, it’s little wonder that historians have attempted to grant globalisation a much longer genealogy. A genealogy of global


\textsuperscript{22} See, for example, Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore, eds., \textit{Lessons of empire: imperial histories and American power} (New York: New Press, 2006).

exchange, interdependence, and transnationalism productively disrupts the imagined historical inviolability of the nation-state.  

In these (and myriad other) ways, national historiography has become the ‘bogeyman’ of much theoretical debate. This counter-national temper of current historiography relies, moreover, on a common disciplinary genealogy. This genealogy traces how, over the course of the 19th century, professional historical knowledge became knowledge of the nation. For world historians attempting to unmake the autonomy of the nation, the 19th century represents a lamentable narrowing of the historical gaze. Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs look to the ‘historiographic expression of European’ nationalism in the 19th century, which ‘encouraged a geographic narrowing of the [discipline’s] subject matter.’ As the modern nation-state was ‘born’ in Europe (France, Italy, and Germany), the discipline of history supplied nationalism with the legitimacy of historical inevitability.

World historians are not alone; postcolonial scholars similarly examine the 19th century—as a moment of both high imperialism and disciplinary birth—to find a troubling accord between national historical writing, the temporalising logics of liberalism, and the ‘sorting categories’ that made colonial expropriation and exploitation possible. In the British (historiographic) world, the writings of 19th-century Whig historians (who discerned the reformist unfolding of liberal Britain as an inviolable island story beginning in the 13th century) bear particular responsibility for the national territorialisation of historical writing. As

25 On the ‘muddiness’ of this emergence, see Ann Curthoys and John Docker, Is history fiction? (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006).
Uday Mehta argues, a key ‘strategy of exclusion’ for liberal thinkers who espoused the apparently universalising rights of man lay in the mutual encoding of racial difference, political competence, and historical development. For these thinkers, the right to ‘representative government and democracy [was] dependent upon societies having reached a particular historical maturation or level of civilization’. This historical maturation, however, was differentially achieved; it could be endlessly deferred for non-white societies. From the perspective of postcolonial and global historians, then, the containment of historical knowledge within national territorial parameters in the 19th century was directed by the racial encodings of imperial rule (by racially certifying European nation-states at the telos of progressive historical development) and the operation of European nationalism (as modern nation-states were made and remade in the rhetoric of liberal rationality).

Similarly, the birth of Australian History as a modern, professional discipline is frequently represented as a moment when historical consciousness turned inward. In many ways, the progressive births of professional (national) history in Europe, Australian nationalism, and then modern Australian history-writing makes this historiographic narrative even more compelling; national history first became the possession of the European nation-state and was subsequently implemented in the colony soon after federation. Nineteenth century historians in the Australian colonies are thus divorced from the moment of disciplinary birth precisely because they tended to write their histories in imperial and colonial terms.

the birth of ‘national’ historical consciousness thus represent both an historiographic break (with colonial historical writings) and a moment of disciplinary origin. So too, discussions of the ‘history wars’ employ this historiographic narrative to great analytic effect. ‘Pre-histories’ of this skirmish frequently ignore the formative possibilities of 19th-century historical writings—after all, if the ‘history wars’ were produced by the alignment of historical knowledge with nationalism, then the beginning of this problem must lie in the birth of national historiography after federation.30 The problems of (white) national history seem to originate in an alliance between (white) Australian nationalism and the modernisation of the discipline.

Across multiple disciplinary sites, then, the political and methodological worth of our transnational sensibility relies on the certainty that in the late 19th century the destination of liberal history (modernity) looked firmly national. Perhaps, though, in our move to decentre the nation from contemporary historical practice we have employed a genealogy that ignores the constitutive impact(s) of empire on both sovereignty and historical thought in the late 19th century. As Frederick Cooper suggests, in the 19th and early 20th centuries imperial unity and trans-territorial political reach could function as signifiers of modernity.31 Indeed, the 19th-century globe was geopolitically managed as much by empires as it was by the boundaries of nation-states. So too (as the various campaigns for imperial federation suggest), in the broader


31 Frederick Cooper, Colonialism in question: theory, knowledge, history (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
imperial world a national geopolitical present and future didn’t necessarily mean a departure from empire.\textsuperscript{32} Whilst the denial of national independence to non-white colonies such as India relied on the idea of territorial, racial and historical distance between the metropole and periphery, in the settler empire the racial commonality of the settler colony and metropole forged powerful racial and historical connections between Britain the colonies. Andrew Thomson and Duncan Bell have found that the 19th-century empire was often imagined as an historical community of English speaking peoples with global reach.\textsuperscript{33} So too, the successful claims on liberal rights by settlers in the mid-19th century forged powerful imaginative connections between reform at ‘home’ and the liberal experiments in the settler periphery. Perhaps for some 19th-century thinkers, modernity was imperial and global in orientation, and the settler empire and its associated racial congenialities suggested a global territory of liberal governance and history.

\textbf{Liberal histories and the settler empire: an alternate genealogy}

It was precisely this historicised object—namely, the settler empire—that the chair of the Colonial Institute in London employed to frame the organisation’s agenda. In his 1869 opening address to what would become the Royal Colonial Institute, John Bury hoped it would be a site where the experiences of empire would coalesce. In the discussion that followed, the complex political relationships within empire were seen as a matter in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{33} Andrew S. Thompson, \textit{The empire strikes back? The impact of imperialism on Britain from the mid-nineteenth century} (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005); Duncan Bell, \textit{Victorian vision of the global order} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
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need of *historicised* discussion.³⁴ So too, speakers at the Colonial Institute were, unsurprisingly, keen to distinguish between the colonies peopled by the ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ and others such as ‘India, [where the task of empire] was very different because we have to respect their idiosyncrasies’.³⁵ Indeed, the ‘great and diversified system of the colonial empire’ could be explained by the different racial constituencies in each territory. These ‘mixed dependencies comprising masses of weaker or less energetic races’ required ‘equitable, adaptive and generous government’ but weren’t historically comparable with the homeland. However, whilst paternal control of the colonies could be justified when this periphery was populated by black bodies, in settler contexts shared racial membership short-circuited the territorial and temporal distinctions between a national metropole and colonial peripheries.³⁶ Speakers continually asserted that the rise of representative government in the settler periphery placed this empire in the same historical and racial landscape as the metropole. Indeed, a crucial component of the Royal Colonial Institute’s discussions would be historical and Bury hoped ‘matters relating to the early history of the colonies’ would find an audience.

Unsurprisingly, in many British settler colonies in the mid-19th century, local histories were produced that charted this type of progress. In the late 1850s, for example, Victoria had been gripped by its first eruption of historicised discourses that took the colony itself as their subject.³⁷ The 1850s and 1860s witnessed the publication of the histories of William Westgarth, James Bonwick and Thomas McCombie, and

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³⁶ This point is made by Daiva K. Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Unsettling settler societies: articulations of gender, race, ethnicity and class* (London: Sage, 1995).
³⁷ See Griffiths,* Hunters and collectors.*
colonial newspapers and magazines began including articles of historical interest. Like the speakers at the Royal Colonial Institute 20 years later, these historians situated Victoria as part of the trans-territorial history of liberal reform and racial progress. James Bonwick’s history of Victoria, ‘using old colonial records … mark[ed] the difficulties of … progression and indicate[d] the ultimate triumph of freedom’. For many historians of colonial Victoria in the 1850s, 60s and 70s, Victoria was simply another example of the Anglo-Saxon story of unfolding liberty and racialised superiority. William Westgarth similarly drew two conclusions from the history of Victoria; first, that the ‘invading progress of the colonists [was an] immutable law of nature and history’; and secondly, that the ‘early’ granting of full manhood suffrage was, in fact, a comprehensible outcome of the racialised character of the Victorian settler population. So too, Thomas McCombie revealed that ‘the old system ha[d] been silently and rapidly passing away and an entirely new order of things … developing itself. From a perfect despotism … to the very opposite point of democracy.’ Unlike the Indigenous population who ‘weren’t fit to have a political existence’, the responsible and respectable Victorians demonstrated precisely the liberal character of British settler-colonial stock.

The characteristics of these settler-colonial historians also reverberated in metropolitan political and historical debates in the later 19th century. James Bonwick suggested to the Royal Colonial Institute on his visit to London that the history of empire would much more productively draw on the traditions and style of ‘Sharon Turner rather

38 Thomas McCombie, The history of the colony of Victoria from its settlement to the death of Sir Charles Hotham (Melbourne: Sands and Kenny, 1858), 1–4.
40 McCombie, The history of the colony of Victoria, 1–4.
than Hume or Macaulay’.41 Citing Turner’s History of the Anglo-Saxons and History of England from the first decades of the 19th century, Bonwick mobilised a tradition of explicitly racialised histories as the framework to comprehend empire—they simply needed to expand Turner’s geography. Other settler-colonial speakers suggested that to understand the history of the settler colonies ‘one needed to study the mother-land and watch as it emerges from barbarism and note its conduct among the rude shocks of the 15th and 16th centuries’.42 However, these Anglo-Saxon outposts, whilst mirroring the early development of England, had in many ways leapfrogged ahead towards the telos of liberal development. As Flora Shaw would remark in the 1890s:

What is to be seen and studied [in Australia] gives us a glimpse into the ... history that is to follow after our time … its developments carry on the history of the race, she offers the introductory chapter of a new history.43

Shaw was not alone; various papers on developments in New Zealand and Canada discussed how these colonies were pursuing political reform at a much faster pace than the homeland.

The pace of reform in the settler periphery, moreover, provided some reforming metropolitan liberals with concrete examples of the destination of British historical change; they functioned as retrospective ‘test cases’ for liberal reform amongst racially-congenial populations.44 Whilst the Reform Acts of the 19th century could signify the uniquely liberal competencies of the English nation and the outcome of centuries

of historical development, they could also be ‘braided together’ with the liberal reforms of the settler empire that preceded them to suggest that modern history was global rather than national. At certain moments in 19th-century British liberal thought—which, because of its reforming character was firmly historicist in orientation—the globalising movement of the British race across the settler periphery forged powerful trans-territorial connections between the settler periphery and the metropole.

Indeed, in the collection of Essays on reform written in support of the 1867 British Reform Act by university liberals, the Australian democratic experiment provided proof of how liberal extensions to the franchise might be successfully achieved. In James Bryce’s chapter on the historical development of democracy in Europe, he argued that any attempt to halt the move towards liberal reform would subvert the historically ordained progress of the British race. Equally significantly, another contributor to the volume argued that British conservatives opposed to the Reform Act should simply read the histories of McCombie and Westgarth for there ‘wasn’t an offensive page amongst them’.

The liberal political and scholarly career of James Bryce in many ways mirrored the global temper of Anglo-Saxon historical consciousness. Bryce chaired the Oxford branch of the Imperial Federation League in the 1880s, and by 1910 he had visited most of the settler empire, seeking to understand how the institutions of English law

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45 The phrase ‘braided together’ is taken from Tony Ballantyne, Orientalism and race (New York: Palgrave, 2006).
46 Andrew S. Thompson, The empire strikes back?: the impact of imperialism on Britain from the mid-nineteenth century (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005).
48 On the connections between Bryce’s historical writings and his political career see Keith Robbins, ‘History and politics: the career of James Bryce’, Journal of Contemporary History 7.3 (1972).
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and governance were operating in these new locations.49 As an historian, Bryce spent much of his career historicising the movement of English legal institutions outside British territory. Historians, for Bryce, needed to comprehend historical change within these reterritorialised parameters and racial difference and migration were two of his central analytic concerns. In Bryce’s own words in 1900, ‘a Teutonic tribe … had extended over much of the globe … in an empire of peaceful settlement and migration in the last three centuries’, and this historical process was in need of empirical investigation.50

In a series of observations that resonate all too disturbingly with the claims of many a globalisation theorist today, Bryce went on to argue that:

the world is becoming one in an altogether new sense … the European races have gained dominion over nearly the whole of the earth … As the larger human groups absorb or assimilate the smaller, the movements of politics, and of thought in each of its regions becomes more closely interwoven with those of every other. Whatever happens in one part of the globe now has a significance for every other part.

For Bryce, the ultimate logic underpinning these developments was the move towards representative government across the globe. The global spread of liberal governance was an historical inevitability. The spread of Anglo-Saxon law meant that ‘world history was becoming one history’.51 In order to comprehend the global trajectories of empire, then, Bryce reached to the language of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and racialised liberal competence. Most importantly, this liberal competence was the unique possession of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’. Other races would simply

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51 James Bryce, University and historical addresses (London: Macmillan, 1913), 211.
‘disappear’ as these regions were ‘closely interwoven’ in a global community of shared racial membership and liberal history.\textsuperscript{52}

At this \textit{fin de siècle}, then, shared racial membership functioned as a powerful anodyne to territorial isolation. It should come as no surprise that many contributors to the federation conventions in Australia were deeply familiar with Bryce’s work.\textsuperscript{53} Moreover, according to Bryce, this was a nation-state that joined a global community of Anglo-Saxon liberal politics at the moment of federation. It was no coincidence that (Ab)original Australians were firmly excluded from the boundaries of Commonwealth citizenship; there was no place for them in this white man’s country.\textsuperscript{54} In this way, (white) Australia wasn’t necessarily only a moment of sovereign birth, it also represented a firm statement of trans-territorial belonging, and thinking in global terms about historical change provided crucial support for this ‘transnational’ imagined community.

\textit{Conclusion}

Present-day critiques of modern historical practice that locate the origin of the ‘narrative contract’ between historians and the nation-state in the geopolitical reconfigurations of Europe ignore the multiple ways in which the expansion of empire mattered for 19th-century historians. Moreover, if nation-states represent a particular ordering of territory and governance alongside an articulation of a population’s ethnic and historical coherence, this triad of population, governance and territory was an equation equally managed via the framework of empire well into the 20th century; histories of a ‘people’, their governance, and territory could and were written about empires. As late-19th-century historians

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. 213.
\textsuperscript{53} For a discussion of Bryce and Australian federation see Graham Maddox, ‘James Bryce: Englishness and federalism in America and Australia’, Publicis 34.1 (2004).
\textsuperscript{54} For a discussion of the ‘white man’s country’ see Marilyn Lake, ‘White man’s country: the trans-national history of a national project’, Australian Historical Studies 24.122 (2003).
were implicated in the formation of the modern discipline and its professional and rhetorical conventions, they examined an imperial world where the graduated sovereignties within the settler empire suggested interdependence and racial commonality rather than national exclusivity. For Bryce and a range of metropolitan historical thinkers and settler-colonial historians, modernity was liberal, but, equally importantly, modern history was the story of a globalising population that reformed the spaces of empire with justifiable racial exclusions and territorial expropriations. In sharp contrast to our own narrative of disciplinary birth, for Bryce, and for others, modern history was a narrative in which liberalism was being realised in trans-territorial rather than national terms.

In our own ‘globalising’ fin de siècle we have similarly adopted a transnational vocabulary. In our context this adoption functions as a corrective response to perceived methodological limitations and political violences of historicising nationally. In seeking to understand these ‘history wars’ as only a problem of national historiography, however, we have animated an historiographic genealogy that ignores the trans-territorial and global traditions of historical writing in the 19th century and the expropriate colonial work they performed. I raise these territorially disruptive histories to problematise this commonly evoked disciplinary genealogy, and not only as a project of ‘empirical’ correction. As the critiques of national historical writing affirm, the stories we tell about ‘our’ past have concrete political consequences. This disciplinary amnesia might have some worrying consequences.

Given that our own era is characterised by its own narratives of liberal reform that function to deny the sovereignty of racialised Others, we might do well to reconsider the globalising rhetorical company we are keeping, accidentally or otherwise. (I’m thinking here of the cross-

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55 Bryce was not alone; we might also consider James Froude and John Seeley who are now usually segregated into ‘imperial’ history. This segregation, however, might not always have been so secure.
national military and economic interventions frequently justified by the universalising claims of economic and political liberalism.) Moreover, locally, state ‘interventions’ into remote Indigenous communities and the rolling back of Indigenous rights to self-determination have been similarly justified by declarations of political and cultural incompetence. As the hegemony of liberal politics once again looks global in scope—and with concrete local effects—our historical vocabulary has similarly shifted, and these connections are disconcerting. Reaching for a language of transnationalism, then, doesn’t necessarily resolve the epistemological quandaries and violences of liberal modernity.

Perhaps, instead, we need to more carefully historicise the relationship between modern historical consciousness, liberalism, nationalism, and claims to globality. It’s possible, moreover, that the nation-state might not be our only historiographic ‘problem’. We also need to remember how the universalising claims of liberalism refuse to be contained within national boundaries. The moment of (white) Australia’s geopolitical birth, when historians employed a globalising narrative of liberal reform to uphold the legitimacy of settler-colonial territorial expropriation, all too clearly demonstrates the damage transnational thinking can do. The ways in which the globalising histories of Thomas McCombie, James Bonwick and James Bryce swiftly (dis)placed Indigenous peoples from their present should serve as a reminder of the ways in which transnational history isn’t without its own strategies of exclusion.