

Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire by Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, 291 pp, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, ISBN 9781107007833 (hbk), \$145.00.

The Brits' IP of R2P: the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) is the most recent international principle that emerged out of a United Nations hamstrung in the face of violations of human rights in sovereign nations – Rwanda, the Balkans, Syria. Or could it be a ricochet from the protectionism of the British empire colonising indigenous sovereign spaces? Lester and Dussart argue that the history of humanitarianism is in itself worthy of historical investigation, and that the nineteenth-century idea of 'protection' is at the root of modern development discourse. In the Western world the Christian concept of a brotherhood of man, which inspired early humanitarian interventions in colonial violence and injustice, has been replaced by a secular and ever-expanding 'circle of we' propelling an 'unprecedented interest in humanitarian intervention' in any part of the world, be it our business or not.

The influence of the British abolitionists in Exeter Hall, transforming themselves into societies for the protection of Aborigines, has long been acknowledged in Australian historiography, but this book frames colonial government agents in a humanitarian perspective, starting with those two *bêtes noires* of Tasmanian history – Governor George Arthur and Protector G. A. Robinson.

Arthur is described as an evangelical Tory who thought in terms of the rights of 'subjects', not rights of 'citizens'. His fear of revolution and of unsettling democratic ambitions steered him always to 'amelioration' rather than anything that might change the balance of powers. Indeed, 'governmental humanitarianism was conditioned by a reactionary fear of democracy and revolution' (p. 30). Arthur became wary of self-serving settlers and their well-rehearsed arguments during his period in Jamaica where he was confronted with the outrages of slavery. He reinvented the office of commissioners in crown colonies as protectors of slaves, soon afterwards enshrined in the *Ameliorative Code* of 1824 (p. 54). In Honduras he challenged the settler-magistrates interpreting the law in favour of slave-abusers and was subsequently hounded to the point of nervous breakdown.

During the high tide of convict transportation, Arthur was recruited to Tasmania on the strength of his reputation as the 'anti-slavery governor' to oversee the assignment of convict labour to free settlers. Aboriginal Tasmanians were soon outnumbered, decimated and displaced, and when the 'Black Line' military operation failed to bring them in, Governor Arthur appointed Protector Robinson whose 'friendly mission' tour to recruit Tasmanian Aborigines to the Flinders Island reservation is symptomatic of conciliation (between 'defiant sovereign indigenous people', settler onslaught and humanitarian concerns).

'Conciliation', stamped on the book cover in the image of G. A. Robinson and Tasmanian Aborigines at Bruny Island, was a model that Lord Glenelg thought

useful for 'elsewhere in the Empire' and the 'elsewhere' soon materialised with an unauthorised settler rush on Port Phillip, to which Robinson was posted as Protector (p. 76).

Using the transnational biographies of Governor George Arthur and Governor George Grey as their 'bookends', Lester and Dussart reach out to other parts of the British empire to identify shifting approaches of the 'ruthless benevolence' of humanitarian governance, from amelioration to conciliation to protection to amalgamation, always underlining how the 'responsibility to protect' was not a natural imprint on governmentality. They draw the bough of intervention from slave workers to convict workers to indigenous people as potential workers, with 'the protector' as a central figure to the mid-19th century, when the first phase of an indigenous protectorate declined under the onslaught of the evolution-fever infecting British science on the one hand, and the growth of settler autonomous governments on the other. Replacing protectionism, the origins of a proto-developmental discourse emerge in Arthur's cotton plantations and model farms in northern India in the wake of the first Afghan war which, incidentally, Arthur found 'difficult to reconcile with our notions of justice' and probably unnecessary, but certainly 'burdensome for many years to come' (p. 270).

Tracing the origins of the British 'responsibility to protect', and skipping over the Protectors of Chinese and many inquiries into conditions of indentured workers towards the end of the 19th century, the authors maintain an ambivalent slant on 'humanitarian governance' as one that seems always firmly grounded in self-interest and artful dodging (a label appended to George Grey by his biographer in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*). In the end they risk offending grassroots activism, which often protests that governments are acting 'not in our name', by agreeing with M. Barnett (2011: 223) that 'the level of organized compassion increases at the very moment when death and destruction indict the humanity of the compassionate' (p. 274). This book lacks a Bibliography and a map to help the reader who has not followed Alan Lester, who has been writing about colonial philanthropy and humanitarianism in the British empire circuits for some 15 years.

Reference

Barnett, M 2011, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

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