GENERAL EDITOR’S FOREWORD

From its inception, the ‘Studies in Imperialism’ series has been concerned in various ways with notions of dispossession and reposssession, with the effects of dismembering and remembering the past upon perceptions in the present. It has also addressed the multiple layers of ambiguity and ambivalence, shrouded in both noise and silence, associated with violence in colonial and imperial settings, as well as the effects of the related cultural phenomena on the so-called metropolitan societies (English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish) within the British Isles. But it would of course be quite wrong to see only a series of lines of cultural force running backwards from the settler territories once known as ‘Dominions’ to a European centre. Such lines operate within each contested nation, as well as among all of them, not least between the neighbours Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada and the USA, South Africa and other African colonies of settlement, and also South Africa as a central pivot between Atlantic and South Pacific worlds. And the central conditioning factor of such disputed representations and commemorations is the relationship of settlers and their descendants with indigenous peoples.

All such relationships are subject to process and dynamic, to expressions of dominance and the re-voicing of the dominated, to the struggles that are inherent in the politics and ideologies of monuments, myths and museum displays. Moreover, dispossession takes many different and cumulative forms. It can be of land and landscape, of distinctive ways of seeing and using the environment and animals, of language, culture, family, lifestyles, identities, as well as gender and generational relationships. Often these are achieved not just by conquest and seizure, by military and economic means, but also by religion, education, and supposed social improvement, all perpetrated in the name of ‘civilisation’ and ‘progress’. All of these are treated or touched upon in the striking group of essays that make up this book. Their authors analyze many examples of grappling with the past through a variety of media and disciplines. Many of them consider the significance of art in all its forms, and it is therefore appropriate - and strikingly innovative - that the work also incorporates contemporary artistic invocations of the complex association of past and present, white and indigenous.

These essays remind us again of the need to escape the nationalist preoccupations which used to dominate the history of these various lands. In recent times, we have had a number of publications taking a strongly comparative approach, including several in this series. But this book moves forward in a significant way. It forcefully points out that we must escape a purely ‘British World’ perspective, viewing so many phenomena as the transplanting of a European model into exotic space. These essays deal in differences as well as similarities and collectively assert the notion that the distinctive character of the several territories examined comes from the nature of their indigenous peoples, and the character of their relationships
with the white settlers who established themselves so violently among them. And in further comparisons, we should also link all this to the experience of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Russian, American, and French colonies of settlement (and perhaps, over shorter time-spans, German, Italian, and Japanese).

But the collection should also make us mindful of the ways in which these acts of violence, destruction and dispossession are still with us. The overweeningly powerful still flaunt and justify their power. Sometimes, the dispossessed and persecuted of the past become persecutors in the present. It is not necessary to give examples, for they are before us every day. And earlier inhabitants of the land simply will not go away. Perhaps I may be forgiven a very personal and local reflection. I currently live in the region of the Piets, that mysterious and dispossessed people who have left us only highly suggestive and beautiful stone carvings, with merely the barest hint of their language in a few place names. Yet a culture destroyed by waves of settlement in the fairly distant past has sometimes contributed to a strangely emblematic myth of Scotland, embattled and often newly assertive.

In this same area of north-eastern Scotland, a travelling people who happily accepted the name of ‘tinker folk’, moved around the landscape, living close to nature often in temporary homes, hunting and gathering, enjoying their own musical and oral culture (including a distinctive version of English, often conveniently impenetrable to outsiders), offering essential services like occasional labour, carefully crafted artefacts, fishing for river pearls, sewing, acts of clairvoyance, and much else. Their lifestyle, which survived until at least the 1930s, has been eloquently described in the works of Betsy White. But the post-Second World War period produced an economic, social and political world in which their marginal existence was no longer acceptable. Soon the hand of authority was against them. Persecuted by the police, chased off land, pursued by school attendance officers, their children removed from them into the tragically euphemistic ‘care’, they were forced to settle and, to a certain extent, assimilate. The parallels should be noted. From a European point of view, as well as from the standpoint of the urban dweller in North America, southern Africa, Australia and New Zealand, we are not dealing with some geographically remote and chronologically distant phenomenon. These violent acts of pressure into conformity are all around us, calling for our alertness and involvement.

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