

Migration, identity, space, and Empire: the Irish and Scots in Australia

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A review of

Lindsay Proudfoot and Dianne Hall, *Imperial spaces: placing the Irish and Scots in colonial Australia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011) ISBN 978-0719078378, Hardback, 248pp. £65.

In 1858 an Englishwoman, Fanny Davis, travelling to Australia described the nocturnal activities of migrants aboard ship: 'In another place will be a lot of Scotch girls dancing with one of them imitating the bagpipes and not one of them with either shoes or stockings on; then the Irish will be squatting down under the boats talking over everybody's business but their own and vowing eternal hatred to the English' (quoted on page 97). Davis's aside appears midway through Proudfoot and Hall's insightful if conceptually heavy study, and serves to introduce their central themes: the diverse ethnic identities of migrants to Australia, and the ways these identities were (re)produced and performed in particular 'spaces' and 'places'. In so doing, they set their sights on two broader historiographical targets. First, they argue that histories of empire, including the 'new imperial history', marginalise settler societies and 'fail... to acknowledge sufficiently the implications of the ethnic heterogeneity of the English, Scots, and Irish migrant stream' (5) Second, the authors tackle the increasingly voluminous literatures on diasporic identities. They reserve their most sustained criticism for 'essentialist' or 'primordial' models imagining ethnic identity to be fixed; rather it was renewed and reconfigured in often complex ways in particular 'semiotic spaces' (a favoured phrase in the study).

The study substantiates these points largely through case studies of the experiences of migrants settling in and around four relatively small towns in Victoria and New South Wales. Having thoroughly explored the literature in the first three chapters, it is on ship that Proudfoot and Hall begin their analysis. Chapter four tackles the performance of ethnicity during the voyage, arguing that during the passage itself ethnic identities were reconfigured, and at times heightened, underlining the point that migrants do not depart with a fixed primordial identity (96-97). The remaining chapters then examine ethnicity in rural and urban life. Chapters five and six devote attention to eastern Australia's pastoral frontiers, with chapter five setting the economic and legislative scene. Chapter six examines ethnicity in various locations in rural life. Few markers can be seen in settler encounters with the environment, with indigenous peoples, in place names, and in architecture. Subtle reminders of ethnicity were more in evidence in aspects of social life, particularly religion, and in familial networks and correspondences with relatives at home (164-5, 167). Chapters seven and eight turn to the small town contexts of Belfast/Port Fairy, Kiama, Kilmore, and Stawell. Chapter seven begins by examining civic governance, then proceeds to ethnic associations and celebrations, before closing on gender. The middle section fruitfully highlights how seemingly unambiguously Scottish or Irish affairs became less ethnically exclusive: the 1900 St Patrick's Day parade in Melbourne marched to the sound of the

Scottish bagpipes (192-3)! Chapter eight, on religious sites and spaces, proves the richest in the book. Often historians have followed contemporaries in using religious denomination as a proxy for ethnicity. Proudfoot and Hall do not entirely reject this approach, but, by focusing on religious architecture, language, and music, add nuance by showing how religious affiliation cut across ethnic boundaries, and how often religious practices were contested within communities.

Proudfoot and Hall undoubtedly provide a useful corrective to the frequent slippage from soft, plural, and contingent to unsustainable hard, singular, and essentialist conceptions of ethnic identity.¹ Moreover the concept of space usefully directs attention away from the texts and discourses and towards the everyday material and ritual performances of ethnicity in churches, buildings, parades and the like. The book is most effective when allowing the rich materials they have assembled within this framework to the fore. The study possesses limitations on two of its chosen areas of focus: migrant identity construction and new imperial history. First, on identity construction, the authors do not claim that their materials ‘... were necessarily widely representative of the Irish and Scots experience’ (this would have required fuller consideration of the populous coastal capitals cities of Sydney and Melbourne), but rather seek to highlight how the ‘singular and messy imagined geographies of the colonial margins of empire might be constructed’. (8) They succeed within this frame but having taken the point, many readers may then wonder how the fragments of Irishness and Scottishness the authors identify came together in the particular locations they analyse, how these evolved over time and across generations, and how ethnic identity interacted with the umbrella identities of ‘British’, ‘Australian’, and ‘White’. In other words, while the authors make a valid point about process, the content of the resultant ethnic identities, and the contrasts between groups of Irish and Scots, could have been drawn out more. Second, Proudfoot and Hall have less to say on (new) imperial history. They criticise this literature for failing to ‘acknowledge sufficiently the implications of the ethnic heterogeneity’ (5). Yet the implications of that acknowledgement are not fully explicated (notwithstanding dubious comments about white ‘subalterns’ on 38-9). Hence, they modestly conclude: ‘Narratives of the British empire which fail to recognise the complex and contingent localism of British and Irish immigrant experience... provide an at best partial account of these settlers’ experience. This is not to deny the importance of the empire’s great discursive themes – emigration and the expansion of Greater Britain, the encounter with the cultural and environmental other, and metropolitan and colonial relations – in framing the local lives... that we have privileged here...’ (39) Indeed, by emphasising the contingent nature of ethnicity the authors have in fact highlighted the challenges in approaching those great ‘discursive themes’ through the prism of ‘ethnic heterogeneity’. However, their title notwithstanding, diasporic identities not the empire are Proudfoot and Hall’s primary concern. On these the authors successfully deploy the concepts of space and place to demonstrate the complexities of Irish and Scottish ethnic identity construction.

¹ F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, (Berkeley, 2005), 59-90.