
REZENSIONEN | REVIEWS

Elizabeth Elbourne, *Empire, Kinship and Violence: Family Histories, Indigenous Rights and the Making of Settler Colonialism, 1770–1842, Critical Perspectives on Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 431 pp.

Reviewed by
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In a comparative history of British settler colonies in North America, Australia, and Africa, Elizabeth Elbourne adds new evidence to support the vital importance of centering family households (and therefore kinship and women) in studies of settler colonies. By tracing how three extended families—the Brant, Bannister, and Buxton clans—negotiated their own attempts at wealth and success through engagement with British settler colonial projects, Elbourne offers a complex account of British settler colonialism in a key period of change. The book argues that over time, between the 1780s and the 1830s, there was a shift from family biopower to more democratic but racialized settler states that reimagined the family of the nation based on white supremacy.

Violence, Elbourne notes, was a constant part of settler colonies, not separate from

families and kinship, closely tied to the pursuit of profit and power gained from colonial land and trade. Elbourne also argues that attempts at making empire moral did not make it less violent. Along the way, she offers some detailed history of how racial concepts like “aboriginal” developed transnationally and how liberal European ideals of a moral or humanitarian colonialism operated. Fundamentally, any future without sovereignty for Indigenous peoples was one in which dispossession would follow, no matter how sincere the efforts of European liberals were to assimilate Indigenous peoples without violence. Assimilation, while imagined by Europeans to be civilized and humanitarian, was a form of paternalism that served settler colonial land greed and the concomitant emergence of white supremacist states.

Three loosely interconnected families are at the center of the book. As all of them are relatively elite, the wealth and status of most of the actors in this book is one of its limitations, reflecting the limitation of colonial archives. Elbourne recognizes this and does not claim otherwise—this is a book about how British settler colonialism developed and imagined its own future, not about resistance to it.

In the first few chapters, the Brants are the central family in the narrative. A prominent North American Haudenosaunee family who supported the British during

the Revolution and later migrated to Upper Canada, siblings Joseph and Mary Brant and their kin demonstrate how some Indigenous elites deployed complex biopolitical alliances as they attempted to hold onto land and sovereignty while maintaining profitable trade in the face of settler colonialism. The household of Mary Brant and William Johnson in the Mohawk Valley is an example of a biopolitically powerful one that used kinship and trade to build alliances with and provide protection to people. Interracial partnerships like that between Brant and Johnson also demonstrate how families consolidated biopower through relationships between colonizers and the colonized—their marriage yielded economic and political advantages for both sides.

In the late eighteenth century, British imperialism depended on mobilizing Indigenous allies for European wars. This mobilization often operated through family biopower, but it also caused anxiety and resentment among white settlers, especially when Indigenous allies were granted land like other veterans of frontier wars. Due to the importance of kin-based alliances, the regulation of kinship was central to the colonization process. Colonial states attempted to control Indigenous identity by regulating marriage and property law. This was in part because communities often had more fluid and nuanced senses of membership than the racialized categories eventually imposed by the colonial state. Thus, intercultural relationships also provoked anxiety, and the Brants experienced a loss of power as colonial states asserted control over Indigenous kinship.

In the middle chapters, Elbourne follows the Bannisters, an impoverished British merchant-class clan seeking financial gain

by working for British settler projects across the globe, from North America to Australia to west and southern Africa. Depending on patronage networks structured by kinship (biopower), the Bannister siblings were involved in colonial administration and settler expansion, as well as in documenting abuses against Indigenous peoples. Elbourne uses their mobile, settler lives to demonstrate how Europeans attempted to mitigate the violence and injustice of colonialism with liberal reform and the rule of law. The patronage that gifted the Bannister brothers with colonial opportunities in the military and the courts demonstrates how biopower worked in and for European families.

In a similar way, the Buxtons, an elite British political family who fought for the abolition of slavery and later took up Indigenous rights, wielded considerable family biopower as Christian humanitarian imperialists. Priscilla Buxton played a vital role in gathering information about colonial injustices. She developed theories about the experiences of enslaved people and Indigenous groups such as the Haudenosaunee, Khoekhoe, Xhosa, and Noongar as well as the Indigenous people of Tasmania. This information was deployed to inform political action and influence public opinion among the elite peers of the Buxtons. Along with her siblings, Buxton aimed to make settler colonies more moral and Christian through information gathering, political activism, and humanitarian intervention, but their efforts were ultimately intertwined with the goals and assumptions of colonialism itself—attempts to “protect” Indigenous peoples from settlers founded on the deep inequality that underwrote such paternalism.

While at times the number of kin navigating colonial paths of power is nearly overwhelming in this meaty comparative history, that is also the point: no individual actor engaged this system alone. Kinship—whether fictive or by birth, marriage, adoption, trade, or diplomacy—fundamentally structured how Indigenous and European people lived through this period, influencing how they took advantage, resisted, or survived the ongoing violence of the settler invasion and the many forms of “elimination of the natives” that followed.¹ Family biopower was a crucial mechanism through which both Indigenous and colonial societies organized power, particularly in the context of settler colonialism. Working together for their own survival and profit, families—not individuals—shaped political, economic, and social dynamics, including the management of resources, alliances, and identities.

Elbourne also demonstrates how power slowly shifted away from elite kinship and family networks (Indigenous, European, and mixed) in this period, as new settler-state governments established themselves as the protectors of white settler families and their property. Fundamentally that shift made it much more difficult for Indigenous women to exercise power and influence, and it also limited European women’s influence to Christian humanitarian (paternalist, imperial) forms.

In some ways, this is a familiar argument about how frontier or borderland zones initially offer multiple paths to negotiate the arrival of new and powerful invaders, including some access to power, land or independence for elite women, but over time a new central authority consolidates around patriarchal settler claims to land assisted by

the rule of law and racial categorizations. Elbourne brings some useful specificity to this argument about how power in borderlands change over time, however. She uses the idea of biopower—the right to decide who lives and dies and under what circumstances, to paraphrase Michel Foucault²—to describe the power that elite families wielded and that white supremacist settler states took over and bureaucratized by about 1840. Families and households, as this book makes clear, are not simply domestic units but also important sites of political and social power.

Notes

- [1] Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.
- [2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (Random House, 1978), 141–144.

Anmerkungen

- 1 Pernille Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire: France in the Americas and Africa, c.1750–1802* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- 2 M. J. Sydenham, *The Girondins* (Athlone Press, 1961).
- 3 Oliver Glied, *Saint-Domingue und die Französische Revolution: Das Ende der weißen Herrschaft in einer karibischen Plantagenwirtschaft* (Böhlau, 2011).