borderlands
e-journal
www.borderlands.net.au
VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2, 2009

REVIEW

Settler Revolutions and Indigenous Dissolutions

James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-world, 1783-1939*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Edward Cavanagh
Swinburne Institute of Social Research

James Belich has produced the most rich and comprehensive comparative history of white settler colonialism – if only the settler side of it – since the transnational turn of the 1990s. Above all else, this is economic history, and that of settlers and not natives. His thesis is composed with beautiful simplicity, and stands tangential, but not adjacent, to the existing scholarship on settler colonialism.

James Belich's most ambitious book yet 'attempts to understand and explain this great Anglo explosion and to do so without fear or favour, celebration or denial' (4). Confronting an impressive literature, and wrestling with new and old debates, Belich dismisses regional exceptionalism in favour of a meta-historical and categorical explanation of the 'Settler Revolution': the establishment and expansion of settler societies in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. On a certain level, Belich might be accused of exchanging one exceptionalism for another (e.g. 165-9, 187, 314), but for the most part, his (British) Empire chest-thumping is kept in check, and the comparisons made inside his 'Anglo-world' are thoughtful and intriguing.

The book is separated into three parts. A contrast can be made with his history of nineteenth century New Zealand, *Making Peoples* (1996), which was effectively divided into three equal sections on native society, contact, and settler society. However, *Replenishing the Earth* is concerned exclusively with the settler component. Part 1 is an outline of his thesis and an explanation of migration, in which old concepts are redefined and stood alongside his trademark neologisms. Readers familiar with Belich's other work will identify

several of these terms, and appreciate their elaboration and application here (Belich, 1996; 1997; 2001; 2005). Part 2 is a test of his hypothesis, showing how 'hyper-colonization' operated in his different case studies. Part 3, presenting perhaps the most original conceptual contribution of this book, presents the 'recolonization' of 'Anglo-Wests' alongside the industrialisation and capitalisation of London and New York, focusing on the concept of Greater Britain and introducing its twin, 'Greater America.' Belich argues that the real decolonisation of America came in the 1900s, not 1776, followed later by the Dominions. Decolonisation in settler societies, according to Belich, should be understood in cultural and economic terms, and not only as a transfer of political power. It is at the end of the book that Belich then applies his framework to non-Anglo settler societies such as Algeria, Manchuria, Siberia, Brazil and Argentina.

Replenishing the Earth is, above all else, economic history: 'Political history has had to take a back seat,' writes Belich in the conclusion, 'and social history has scarcely featured at all' (548). His favourite sources are numbers – of population, migration, and trade – and his footnotes reveal that he has computed a great deal of them. He argues for a 'rhythmic' understanding of the booms and busts of the Anglo-world, interpreting this data according to various stages of growth: 'incremental colonization,' 'explosive colonization,' 'recolonization' and 'decolonization.' His categorisation is strict, and I suspect regional specialists will be able to spot inaccuracies.

I had trouble, for example, with his point that wool was insignificant in the New South Wales economy until *after* the depression of 1841-3, a point he makes to support his argument that staples were the result 'of busts, not booms' (277-8, 364). But wool was surely important from at least 1833, especially when seen in relation to the colony's population (see McMichael, 1984: 262; Vamplew (ed.), 1987). That the Griquas thrived in South Africa's 'Boom 2' (1872-82) is also incorrect (384). On the contrary, this was the period in which their economic and political autonomy was destroyed. The Griquas' moment in the South African sun came in the 1850s and probably earlier, when they successfully combined pastoral, agricultural and middle-man pursuits, and the market value of their land surged, not later (Ross, 1976: 66-80; see also Waldman, 2007: 69-77).

Belich distrusts the 'staple' thesis, which he argues is unhelpful in explaining the patterns of comparative settler economics (96-8, 286-8, 339-45). Imports pumped the arteries of the Anglo-world, he argues, and exports were only as important as the infrastructural development caused by the import-oriented 'Progress Industry' (a condition of high-speed growth or hyper-colonisation, and the ultimate gauge of growth). The argument is well developed if a bit pedantic, because trade is a bidirectional, not a unidirectional, relationship, and railways were always laid to import as well as export. Doubtless, though, Belich's anti-staple stance will earn him quite a bit of attention in economic history circles. More interesting than the reprioritisation of

staples in settler economics, I think, is his categorisation of them all together in one bundle: cotton, fur, meat, minerals, sugar, timber, tobacco, wool, whale oil and wheat (and others) are all seen as contributing to the one Settler Revolution. No distinction is made between the economic environments in which they were produced (whether mercantilist, plantation, colonial, settler colonial, or any combination of these). Yet every product harnessed for Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – inside and outside of the Anglo-world – demanded different metropolitan attention and specific configurations of land, labour and capital. The suggestion that settler colonies could dabble in many arts is very important for writers of imperial history. But I believe that recognising how different products make settler families different to groups of sojourning traders, or teams of slaves, is fundamental in showing the difference between a colonial economy and a *settler* colonial one.

This relates to how colonialism and settler colonialism are understood. Belich protests against the 'acquired schizophrenia' associated with the dual meaning of the term 'colonization,' that of 'the subjugation of distant peoples, and the reproduction of one's own people through far settlement,' making clear that he is only interested in the latter (178, 209). Belich is right to make this distinction: *colonialism* (where the colonising enterprise relies, directly or indirectly, on the labour of native people or the networks they created) and *settler colonialism* (where, ultimately, only the land of native people is necessary) are not the same. *Replenishing the Earth* is a book about the latter phenomenon, written with a disregard of the economic activity of indigenous people – a decision that reproduces the notion of native unnecessariness to the settler colonial project. Despite this consistent omission, Belich argues that '[t]he Settler Revolution thesis promotes some indigenous peoples from history's victims to riders of the whirlwind' (554). Yet it remains the job of other historians to truly test this claim.

The one exception to this pattern of indigenous silences relates to Belich's insights on indigenous resistance. He argues that '[e]xplosive colonization changed the nature of the problem facing indigenous peoples from a scale that they could often handle to a scale that they could not' (182), concluding that '[t]hese peoples could cope with normal European colonization; it was *explosive* colonization that proved too much for them' (181). In general terms, he is drawing a link between intensifying patterns of settlement and increasing settler-native conflict – a long-established axiom of frontier history – but the link is better explained in some places than others. In South Africa, for instance, Belich does not sufficiently show how booms assisted some native Africans at the same time as they were cornering other indigenous peoples in the rest of the Anglo-world into an unwinnable 'fight.' On top of the implication that settler violence and indigenous destruction belong in history as *faits accompli* (and therefore that settler colonialism is an event and not a structural continuum), there is something rather strange about Belich's concern with 'indigenous military victories.' Although Belich might feel he is doing justice to the

'precursor peoples,' he may just be perpetuating a vintage militant-imperialist discourse, that of the noble fighting savage. His narrative is rife with 'formidable' natives who never went down 'without a fight.' 'When explosive colonization came,' he writes of Australian Aborigines, 'their resistance was intense, courageous, and well-organised, though ultimately unsuccessful. […] Some European nations might well have put up less of a fight.' In California, '[s]ome groups, such as the Modoc people in 1872-3, put up a remarkable fight.' A few years later in Oregon, 'a few hundred Nez Perce battled two thousand federal troops and volunteers, initially with amazing success. […] Yet again these groups […] had coped with decades of European trade and settlement before they were finally run down by explosive colonization.' It was much the same in Canada for 'the Métis and great Indian tribes such as the Plains Cree,' whose 'resistance was determined and pan-tribal before being overwhelmed by money and numbers' (180-2, 273, 316, 397, 407). This rhetoric brings out Belich's old military historian, presumably on display for the mainstream audience that OUP has earmarked for this book. But I suspect many readers will spot these inclusions a mile away. Perhaps the only reason they stand out so much is because they are the only references he makes to indigenous people.

His chapter on 'settlerism' presents a shift in approach away from the economy and towards the domain of culture. Settlerism was 'a powerful, even revolutionary, ideology, transforming the concept of emigration and giving the Anglo-world the human capital to rise … [taking] place in a wider context of ideological ferment … [from which] emerged socialism, Chartism, communism and new forms of evangelism, trade unionism, Utopianism, and racialism, as well as settlerism' (163). This is an important chapter showing how emigrant guides, letters, promotional literature and word-of-mouth were transformed into a speculative and self-fuelling settler ideology during hyper-colonisation. Quoting primary material and displaying fascinating colonial etymologies, Belich sheds light on a transnational process that historians have typically considered exceptional (e.g. Owram, 1980).

Yet here again the shortfalls of his all-settler approach are evident. After all, 'human populations construct their cultures in interaction with one another, and not in isolation,' as Eric Wolf has written (1982: xi). What was the role of the native in expansionist ideology, and how did these differ across the Anglo-world? How did the cultures of the possessors lend from those of the dispossessed? Perhaps this criticism is unfair. Belich is, after all, quite frank in his decision to talk about settlers only in *Replenishing the Earth* – and what he accomplishes in 550 pages is indeed remarkable. But pointing out that indigenous peoples have been largely kept out of this narrative is more than expressing a clichéd demand that indigenous agents be re-written back into white men's historiography. Belich misses a golden opportunity here. Recent scholarship, especially of the last decade, has persuasively shown how indigenous people, by their existence as Others, or sometimes even by their very absence, played a crucial

role in the shaping of settler identities. This body of work suggests that settler cultures, with their selective amnesia, their assumption of inevitable extinction, their aura of whiteness, their malleable conception of property law, their discourses of savagery and nomadism, and their science of biological racism, were perfect for the job of erecting a structural colonial system that 'destroys to replace' (Wolfe, 2001). Belich can be forgiven for not plugging into this sub-discipline of colonial studies, since he is an academic content to re-invent the wheel every time he writes something – and this is why he is such a captivating author to read. But elsewhere in his own writings, he has emphasised the importance of the Maori contribution to the making of New Zealand (Belich, 1996; 1997), and disappointingly, this emphasis is not transferred onto *Replenishing the Earth.*

Belich's writing, as always, is refreshingly energetic, complete with booms, busts, explosions, -isms, megas and -manias. I must admit finding myself distracted at times by his inclusion of many full-sentence quotes, of other historians, that are often positioned back-to-back without attribution, sometimes taking over entire paragraphs (e.g. 51, 360, 411). Perhaps he could have summarised in text and consolidated some endnotes instead. This, along with a handful of minor errors (like his inconsistent capitalisation of 'Aboriginal'), should have probably been picked up by his editors.

It is possible, too, that some scholars will have trouble with Belich's use of the label 'Anglo' to signify the actors in these rather heterogeneous communities of settlers, but it seems in this respect he has just been let down for want of a better word. Belich here deserves praise for facilitating the interplay of South Africa, French Canada and the United States with the more British Australia, Canada and New Zealand – a daunting task as those who have attempted it appreciate. 'Anglos,' he carefully explains, were those people in the nineteenth century connected by a global network of economic and cultural ties, who were likely to speak English and practice Protestantism, but did not necessarily have to; the societies they created paralleled each other in their method of expansion and reliance upon a metropolitan 'Oldland' unit, but boomed and busted differently across time and space (49-65). Although Belich displays sensitivity in submitting 'Anglo,' both as noun and prefix, not all readers will be convinced – especially given the disproportion of his analysis (for instance, settlement in the American mid-west and west receives well over a hundred pages while South Africa gets only thirteen). But this should not take anything away from his overarching thesis, which is quite something to behold at the end of it all. Ultimately, as he admits, the model he constructs is for other historians to apply for themselves: 'Histories of settler societies, and of their indigenous rivals, that ignore boom, bust, and export rescue are like rural histories without seasons. Factoring them back into history adds another whole colour to the historian's palette' (222).

Replenishing the Earth is the most rich and comprehensive comparative history of white settler colonialism – if only the settler side of it – published since the transnational turn of the 1990s. A sequel on the rhythm of indigenous economies would spectacularly complement his thesis of incremental colonisation, explosive colonisation, and recolonisation. If this is Professor Belich's next project, I suspect he might reconsider whether or not settler colonialism has truly ended when dealing with the decolonisation stage.

Edward Cavanagh is a student of historical and cultural studies at the Swinburne Institute of Social Research, Melbourne. His research interest is in the comparative history of the settler colonial projects of the British Empire.

Bibliography

Belich, J. (1996), *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Belich, J. (1997), 'Myth, race, and identity in New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 9-21.

Belich, J. (2001), *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Belich, J. (2005), 'The rise of the Angloworld: settlement in North America and Australasia, 1784-1918', in P. Buckner & R.D. Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World,* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, pp. 39-57.

McMichael, P. (1984), *Settlers and the Agrarian Question: Capitalism in Colonial Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Owram, D. (1980), *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Ross, R. (1976), *Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vamplew, W. (ed.) (1987), *Australians: Historical Statistics*, Broadway: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Ass.

Waldman, L. (2007), *The Griqua Conundrum: Political and Socio-Cultural Identity in the Northern Cape, South Africa*, Bern: Peter Lang.

Wolf, E.R. (1982), *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley: University Of California Press.

Wolfe, P. (2001), 'Land, labor, and difference: elementary structures of race', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 3, pp. 866-905.

© borderlands ejournal 2009