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REVIEW ARTICLE

**Genocide and Colonialism from New and Old Perspectives**

A. Dirk Moses (ed), *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, New York: Berghahn, 2008.

John Docker, *The Origins of Violence: Religion, History and Genocide*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008.

Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming. Nathaniel Pepper and the Ruptured World*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2007.

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*Some historians consider genocide an inappropriate concept in a colonial context. Yes, whole peoples disappeared under the assault of colonialism, but was that the intention? A misguided insistence on the evidence of words rather than actions does not dominate the many important contributions to the Moses collection with its impressive variety of examples and approaches. In Docker's book the discussion of both words and deeds is extended back in time and opened to sophisticated interpretation. There is sophisticated interpretation of a different kind in Kenny's extended case study. From outside the context of genocide studies it speaks to key issues of destruction, adaptation and survival.*

Have genocide studies peaked? The question occurred to me in a recent overview of the field in Australia in part because of the tendency to find alternative terms for the mass deaths suffered by indigenous peoples in the era of modern colonialism. Frontier violence, colonial warfare, population decline, cultural destruction: all were favoured over a concept contaminated with malevolent intent. These essays give me hope. Here we have conquest, occupation,

resistance and religion—but with genocide (in the first two at least) front and centre.

We should not expect otherwise from Dirk Moses or John Docker. Both have long been prominent for sophisticated interventions that have kept Australian genocide studies at the vanguard of international discourse. The twenty essays which they have published here—Docker's book, too, is an extended and sub-divided essay—are valuable not only for their range but for their consistent focus on extending the dialogue between conceptual and historical concerns.[1] While Robert Kenny does the same, his is a sophisticated intervention of a different order.

Moses has gathered an elite cohort of scholars with unrivalled expertise. Still, he makes no claim to comprehensiveness and I must follow his example. It is way beyond any review to do justice to the wealth of research and interpretive insight in all of these contributions. So let me say at the outset: the book is essential reading for anyone grappling with the deep and often intractable issues that confront us as historians of genocide. There is no easy read in these 19 chapters and 500 pages because the diverse kinds of expertise leave so many problems to ponder. As in his earlier collection on Australia, *Genocide and Settler Society* (2004),[2] the editor's introductory essay is masterful in its discussion of empire, colony and genocide as keywords that need careful searching for the ways they (and the processes they denote) have impinged on each other. By the middle of the twentieth century, 'the link between human catastrophes and the meta-narrative of human progress was clearly in the minds of European and non-European intellectuals' and it continues to matter 'because the moral legitimacy of Western civilization is at stake as well as...the legitimacy of anti-colonial struggles of national liberation' (Moses (ed.), 2008: 5). It is here that Moses introduces the notion of a 'subaltern' dimension.

'Subaltern,' I'll admit, is not my favourite imposition of the Western academy on the rest of the world and I balked at the concept of 'subaltern genocide.' But Moses gives it an original and potent twist. He draws attention to the widespread historical phenomenon of indigenous revenge against colonizers and the kind of writing that foresaw or promoted it. Many colonial regimes—in the Americas, in Australia, in Africa—made sure they forestalled the possibility. Jabotinsky warned in the 1920s that Zionists must do the same. The reason for violent excess in so many cases, Moses argues, is that 'the genocidal impulse and the national liberation impulse are effectively the same: to preserve the endangered genus or ethnos against an Other that supposedly threatens its existence. This is the origin of what we might call *subaltern genocide*: the destruction of the colonizer by the colonized' (Moses (ed.), 2008: 31).

Moses makes Hitler an instructive example. 'Subaltern' of course has military origins and many will recall the aged Field Marshal

Hindenburg and his disdain for ‘the Bohemian corporal’—whom he nevertheless appointed Chancellor. Hitler then presented him with emergency decrees that laid the foundation for the lowly leader of a party to appoint himself ‘Führer’ of the state when Hindenburg died. From an unprecedented position of power Hitler made the subaltern fantasy of revenge and expulsion actual over the short and catastrophic course of his rule. Targeted were ‘Jewish’ Marxists, ‘Jewish’ economic and cultural influence, and the old elites who had allowed their nation, in effect, to be colonized by the two noxious collectives basic to German anti-Semitism, *das Judentum* (‘Jewry’) and *die Juden*, ‘the Jews.’ The collectives, it turned out, could only be eradicated by the physical eradication of men, women and children. The Moses paradigm should at last overturn the entrenched popular puzzlement at the resources Hitler devoted to destroying the Jewish ‘enemy,’ even to the very end.

But neither Hitler nor his Holocaust dominate this book. Rather, it gives earlier cases of settler colonialism and the resistance it generates much overdue attention. Several of the writers, most notably Patrick Wolfe, take up the challenge issued by Lorenzo Veracini in his chapter, to connect the ideological information in the ‘settler archive’ with the many catastrophes of colonialism. (Veracini and Wolfe are also among the minority who are explicit about the Israeli bout of settler colonialism proudly bulldozing its way today.) Whether—Veracini quotes Bacon—every ‘plantation’ demands an ‘extirpation’ is indeed a general rule does not often come up for discussion. However the examples (Ann Curthoys on Tasmania, Raymond Evans and Norbert Finzsch on Australia and North America more widely, Dominik Schaller on German rule in Africa) are grim. Andrew Fitzmaurice importantly recalls the anticolonial traditions of Western political thought on which Raphael Lemkin drew when he invented the concept of genocide, but as both Moses and Mark Levene remind us, the scale and interconnectedness of Europe’s imperial projects overwhelmed all critics. And in deploying sheer ‘biopower’—an idea Dan Stone elaborates—the way was opened for the return of racist demographic policies to Europe itself.

Within Europe—or on its fringes—the Germans did not lead the way. Donald Bloxham has further important insights into the Armenian genocide, as Robert Geraci has into Imperial Russia in the Caucasus. (He takes care not to blame the genocidal fantasies and bloodshed on all Russians or even all Russian imperialists.) David Furber and Wendy Lower work from their archival research to make vivid the insistent policy connections between colonialism and genocide in Nazi-occupied Poland and Ukraine. They also reinforce the thesis that the campaign to eradicate ‘world Jewry’ by cleansing its ‘breeding ground’ in the east would be carried through regardless of the economic or military consequences.

The ‘subaltern genocide’ insisted on by Hitler as a nation-preserving necessity has to count as the most ambitious and successful in

modern times but other examples from distant colonies are also horrific in their smaller-scale aims and results. When David Cahill describes 'genocide from below' in the southern Andes in 1780-82 and Robert Cribb 'the brief genocide' of the Eurasians in Indonesia in 1945-46, we can see how things could have developed more catastrophically. In Canada, the Blackfoot religious resistance over sixty years from 1870 to 1930 detailed by Blanca Tovías seems not to have developed a subaltern revenge stream at all.

Cambodia, once again, appears as *sui generis* among genocides. New light is shed by both Ben Kiernan and Alexander Hinton. The 'serial colonialism' Kiernan elucidates in the nineteenth century (not all of it French), and the very particular nature of Cambodian encounters with France's modernising rule explicated by Hinton do much for our understanding of the Khmer Rouge. The ferocity of their counter-modern campaign is something else.

Speaking of counter-modern radicalism: contemporary Islam is a surprising omission in the context here constructed. Is not every roadside or suicide bombing an act of 'subaltern' resistance to neo-colonial domination? There is no doubt that both Jihadist radicalism and patriotic Islamic resistance are reactive to Western interventions and influence; that does not mean there are genocidal aims on either side but it does mean a conflict with alarmingly genocidal potential. From Bloxham we learn about Turkish Muslim resistance to perceived Christian dangers whereas Cribb sees scant religious motivation in the Indonesian case.

Islamic violence is an even more surprising absence in John Docker's book. He does much to address the neglect of antiquity and premodern times Moses notes in genocide studies. He goes back to 1718 for 'Islamophilia' but that is the only indexed reference to Islam. There are many biblical references but none to the Koran. The tolerant world about which Docker wrote in *1492: The Poetics of Diaspora* does seem a distant past.

*The Origins of Violence* begins with Lemkin, and indeed the book can be read as an ambitious extension to the important essay on Lemkin's work Docker contributes to the Moses collection. There his focus is on the Americas; here the linked essays range from the earliest hunter-gatherers to the Enlightenment and the Holocaust, from chimpanzees to present-day Zionism. The book is less a history than a discursive tour through the tragedy and even comedy played out in human attempts to justify conquests and exterminations. The dominant tone is one of critique, bringing the theoretical and literary sensibility we expect of Docker to an eclectic symposium of classic and academic writings. Like the majority of his readers, I do not have the erudition to question his reading of Aeschylus or Virgil and since more than half the book works from classical texts I was often at sea. But the attempt to induct us into a discourse so few people nowadays pursue is valiant and often rewarding. A short course on the Trojan War is

interwoven with theses from Lemkin to make a thoroughly modern exegesis of that conflict's exemplary nastiness, and it is not difficult to assent to the various suggestions pointing to a genocidal campaign. Whether we see here 'the origins of violence' is another question. For most people, the anthropological (not anthropomorphic) comparison of chimpanzee behaviour will ring more bells and take us closer to the evolution echoed in the title but scarcely pursued: Darwin is not followed far.

Perhaps that is because of Docker's declared dissatisfaction with the focus on modernity, and its secularism. He is drawn to the pre-modern (even the pre-human) world and the 'post-secular' recognition that 'religious narratives, for good or ill, stimulate, inspire and shape human action' (2008: xiii). No-one could disagree with the attempt to find in ancient cultures elements of violence and incitement to violence that might be relevant to understanding later kinds of atrocity. His focus on the narratives of victimology enrich the discourse of 'subaltern' revenge. Yet not everyone will be convinced that the long and idiosyncratic historical reach illuminates the historical processes at work in later genocides. Modernists like me are likely to resist being drawn into Greek tragedy when there are tragedies closer to the present that we seek to explain. How far Docker himself believes that Clytemnestra and Cassandra prefigure Hitler and Himmler is unclear; his style is allusive. He resists a too direct connection between Old Testament broadsides and the cruelty present day Israelis inflict on Palestinians.

The last chapter says it will deal with a key modernist concern—'Was the Enlightenment the origin of the Holocaust?'—but is more concerned to desecularise the Enlightenment than to connect it to later events. As a stand-alone essay it is rich and stimulating; leading into the Conclusion that returns the focus to Israel and the ways 'concepts that appear honourable' can sanction genocidal destruction, it is an engaging diversion. I would rather hear more from Docker—and from historians he might inspire—about 'the belief that some human groups have the historical right to supersede other human groups' (Docker, 2008: xiii) and its expression in different episodes of colonisation.

The destructiveness of colonisation (often noted by Herodotus) is a major theme, linked—though not systematically as it is by Kiernan—to the aggressiveness of agrarian societies. Since so many inciters of genocide have both usurped the land and reached for religiously sanctioned precedent, as Cromwell did in the subjugation of the Irish, it makes sense to search for lines of descent and influence from earlier traditions. But that is only part of Docker's enterprise. He wants to show that the oldest records can be illuminated afresh by Lemkin's new concept, to demonstrate that genocide is far from being the 'blunt instrument of analysis' some have taken it to be.

That is a challenge the essays collected by Moses also provoke, namely: while genocide itself can be an illuminating concept, it demands that the greatest range of other concepts be deployed to differentiate, question, compare. What I still prefer to call the *relations of genocide*—the historically specific sets of interactions that produce genocidal outcomes—need to be analysed as they are here, with new research and dialectical imagination. Whether inspired by ‘civilisation,’ ‘supersessionism’ or ‘subaltern,’ the historical work that will make unique instances of genocide more comprehensible, and then more comparable, has a way to go yet.

Robert Kenny, I hoped, would take me into one of the unique instances with imagination and persistence. Neither quality, however, leads him towards genocide scholarship: I looked in vain for references to any recent work on the destruction of Australian indigenous peoples. To be fair, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming* does not have the ring of physical or even cultural catastrophe. Yet *Nathaniel Pepper and the Ruptured World* would seem to bring the nature of the rupture to centre stage.

Of a great antipodean historian (Bernard Smith) another (Greg Denning) once said, ‘In the margins is where his centre is’ (Denning, 1998: ix, 142). If there is any place at the margins of world genocide studies it would have to be Ebenezer Mission in the Wimmera country of southern Australia. Yet there, sure enough, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a few Europeans concentrating on one black man’s conversion to Christianity did know that genocide was what they were up against. They knew their mission was to save ‘the remnants of the native population’ (Kenny, 2007: 13) and that the exceptional black man was a survivor in a place where his kin had been murdered. His world had been ruptured by killing, by a deadly mix of diseases, by an invasion of strange animals (even stranger, as Kenny notes, than the men who accompanied them), and by a new world order imposed from far across the sea. The disaster belongs to a large history of empire, conquest and colony, to processes of occupation, usurpation and cultural destruction that Kenny connects back to 1492 and forward to Nazi ideology but it is the tragic and triumphant life of Nathaniel Pepper that gives him an entry point for reflections that everyone wrestling with colonial displacement and adaptation should read.

How one clearly exceptional ‘subaltern’ resisted and embraced a near total upheaval of life patterns and meanings is only part of Kenny’s brief. He is also interested in the Christian fervour of the young German missionaries who helped the Aboriginal remnant survive in a booming British colony. While the historical understandings of the time were shaped by secular messages—first the ideology of the settlers and then a destructive Darwinism—it is another realm of ideas, from ‘Noah’s curse’ to ‘the saving blood of the lamb,’ from the Christian export of ‘sin’ and repression to the doctrine of ‘One Blood’ militating against racism, that really engages him.

It engages readers as well: this is a prizewinning book. Kenny has the kind of intellectual range and curiosity that can only enhance the often too narrow ambit of genocide studies, where a specific event might be interpreted within a framework limited to points of law or policy. He certainly opens up questions of religion (going back to Augustine) that Docker wants to bring into play. And he does it by insisting we understand the players in terms they would themselves have understood. But he does not always help us to understand their catastrophic situation. The genocidal onslaught of the land rush is over. The consequences, notably in the form of tuberculosis, venereal disease and alcohol, are everyday tragedies the missionaries address mainly by seeking separation of the survivors from the surrounding settlers. That policy undoubtedly secured a future for the remaining Aborigines even if it meant importing marriage partners from the other side of the continent. Kenny, though, keeps his focus on religion: how a few survivors came to recognize Christianity as a saving good in a terrible wave of evil.

By the 1860s the great tide of death and displacement is waning but the physical and cultural disaster remains. Aboriginal society has been wiped out in a generation. The next generation is not being born.

Where Kenny reaches back to observations made by the Protectors we are reminded of the despairing immediacy that fills their journals, letters and reports. That is not the tone here and there is little detail about Aboriginal or European conditions of life. The one case of killing that becomes a pivot in the story is highlighted because the consequences (in terms of conversion) were exceptional. For other killings and their consequences, we must go to witnesses not heard here. The exceptional intervention of the missionaries is the focus, not the genocidal tsunami that washed them onto a remote inland shore.

Having recently traversed the same historical landscape, I could only wonder again at how different purposes, different conceptual glasses, differently constructed contexts, made for such different histories. We ought to celebrate the diversity of perspectives that help us grasp any past reality. But some realities cannot be grasped unless they are named and debated. Kenny begins with Richard Rorty: 'What might our past look like if we decided that...history is an endless network of changing relationships, without any great climatic ruptures...?' (Rorty, 1998: 121). What, indeed.

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### Notes

1. Moses' *Empire, Colony, Genocide* can be found online at <http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title.php?rowtag=MosesEmpire>.

Docker's *Origins of Violence* is at <https://www.unswpress.com.au/isbn/9780868409740.htm>

2. See Alan Lester's review of A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*. New York: Berghahn, 2004, at [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol5no1\\_2006/lester\\_moses.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol5no1_2006/lester_moses.htm)

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