
Anna Johnston’s *The Paper War* extends a fifteen year preoccupation with missionary Lancelot Threlkeld and his controversial participation in early New South Wales society. The book takes its title from Threlkeld’s description of the proliferation of writing sparked by him and his Lake Macquarie Aboriginal Mission. *The Paper War* thus offers an extended case study of the ways in which colonial knowledge was generated, disseminated and challenged at a particular historical juncture. The novelty of Johnston’s approach is signalled early on with her assertion that ‘it was in the field of textuality that the real battles of the Lake Macquarie mission were fought’ (p. 19).

The detritus of these textual battles formed the unwieldy transnational archive that Johnston so adeptly navigates. In fact, the archive itself is foregrounded as much as Threlkeld. The real value of *The Paper War*, then, is not the disclosure of new facts about Threlkeld per se, but rather as an exemplary instance of viewing the archive as a means to comprehend the construction of, as the book’s subtitle has it, ‘morality, print culture, and power’ in colonial society. In this, *The Paper War* complements the growing scholarship that explores the various channels through which colonial ideas could be negotiated as they circulated both within Australian colonial society and, drawing on the so-called ‘new imperial historians’, between New South Wales and England.

Johnston’s starting point is thus to question the validity of archival research as a purely extractive exercise when the meanings found within it are so inherently unstable. Daringly, if somewhat belatedly, Johnston politicises her text by marching headlong into the history wars, the discussion of which bookends *The Paper War*. Threlkeld is positioned as caught between the mudslinging of Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle, neither of whom escapes Johnston’s critique. It is the mediation of this contemporary ‘war’ that is mirrored in the central chapters of the book.

An initial contextual chapter introduces both the Lake Macquarie Mission and the network of actors (prominently including Samuel Marsden and John Dunmore Lang) in Johnston’s drama. Indeed much of the pleasure of reading *The Paper War* is derived from the author’s patient plotting of the combative exchanges between her irascible cast in both newspapers and the courtroom. This necessarily conventional backgrounding provides the basis for Johnston to develop her arguments.

Johnston’s literary training is apparent in the attention afforded to the production of different ‘languages’ located within the archive. She demarcates her scholarly territory by affirming that ‘because this is a literary/cultural study, it examines the archive as a set of writing and reading practices, seeking to make different meanings than an historian might’ (p. 4). Yet this particular disciplinary
divide is perhaps narrower than that, evidenced not least by the current crop of historians that Johnston herself approvingly cites.

The four remaining core chapters deal with, in turn, Threlkeld’s knowledge and championing of Aboriginal language and its representation and translation in white settler power structures; the dialogism of the colonial press; and the language of the civil and criminal courts respectively. Yet, reflecting the broader aims of the book, these sections overlap to demonstrate the profound intertextuality of early colonial knowledge. In each chapter, too, the fluidity and mutability of meaning is central. As such, Johnston attends to the key postcolonial concern of power/knowledge or, in other words, ‘[w]hat could be said, publicly, and with what authority? In what spaces could things be said and by whom?’ (p. 8) One achievement of The Paper War is to shed light on these questions with particular regard to Indigenous subjectivities and the problem of their legal representation in settler society.

This concentration on print and reading culture in colonial New South Wales is a valuable one and provides a neat micro accompaniment to Alan Atkinson’s macro focus on Australian textual culture during the same period. If Atkinson provided a landscape portrait of colonial society which is attentive to detail, Johnston offers an extreme close-up. Likewise many of The Paper War’s concerns coincide with Kirsten McKenzie’s work (cited frequently in chapter 4) on the transmission of scandal between metropolitan London and colonial Sydney and Cape Town in the second quarter of the 19th century.

The brief concluding discussion of present day debates is a particularly necessary one and might have been more explicitly connected to the detailed historical episodes within the book’s central chapters. Indeed at times it is the very richness of The Paper War’s multifarious archive that presents its own impediment. The author’s command of the material is beyond all doubt. Yet the frequent recourse to quotation of primary, not to say secondary, sources, while adding scholarly rigor and historical flavour, is often trumped by Johnston’s own interpretation. It is when Johnston’s lucid exposition drives the narrative that the reader can most fully admire this stimulating and significant contribution to grasping the complexities of Australian colonial culture.

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