Tiffany Shellam’s *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* is an ethnohistory of the first years of contact and interaction between the British soldiers and the King Ya-nup people at King George’s Sound, from 1826 to the early 1830s. Rather than offering a narrative history *per se*, Shellam examines the emerging relationship episodically to elucidate broader understandings of the British and Indigenous people during this period.

Through careful analysis, Shellam unsettles our preconceptions of the interactions between the British and King Ya-nup. She assumes that both cultures are foreign to the twenty-first century historian: ‘My goal is to understand both British and Aboriginal behaviour as far as possible in terms of their own past contexts rather than impose an unthinking presentist framework’. (p.22) To achieve this end, Shellam employs all the source material at her disposal to depict the King Ya-nup world before and during the British presence at King George’s Sound.

The symbol of ‘the fringe’ recurs throughout the book to highlight the loose spatial and cultural boundaries that define colonisation. During these early years, it is the British who dwell at the coastal fringes of King Ya-nup country, who look towards the ocean for home. It is they who are entering foreign lands, occupied by a dominant culture. Shellam also emphasises the efforts of the Indigenous people to utilise the colonial system for their own ends, traversing the fringes of the two worlds. In complicating the mainstream narrative of a dominant British culture, at the time of colonisation, Shellam questions the notion of King George’s Sound as a ‘friendly frontier’ (p.71). The ‘peaceful’ British garrison settlement has traditionally been juxtaposed with the violent conflicts that marred the colonisation of the Swan River. Shellam suggests we revise this view. Acts of ‘violence’ and ‘friendship’ both between the newcomers and the King Ya-nup and within these groups must be studied more closely within their contexts to avoid misunderstanding.

Shellam’s *Shaking Hands* was originally written as a PhD thesis at The Australian National University and the book bears traces of this origin. Some might consider it labours too heavily on methodology and the difficulties that an ethnohistorical approach raises for the author. Yet these caveats also provide important insights into the historian’s craft, which are useful to those pursuing similar research methodologies. After all, this book complements and borrows from Inga Clendinnen’s *Dancing with Strangers* (Text Publishing, 2003), which studied the early years of the British colonisation of New South Wales. Clendinnen’s self-conscious writing style has clearly provided Shellam with a guide for conducting similar research in the south west of the continent.

Although Shellam repeatedly emphasises her desire to avoid passing judgement on the past, she sees a present-day role for her research. She writes, ‘[I]t is important to realise the constructive aspects of these colonial interactions too, as such narratives help to encourage intercultural acts of construction rather than destruction today’ (p.78). Moreover, she believes ‘there is an ethical importance in celebrating moments of friendship, reciprocity and respectful interaction in Aboriginal relations with non-Indigenous people’ (p.216). It can serve to deepen Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of place and a shared past. Painstakingly researched and beautifully illustrated with maps, sketches and photographs, Shellam’s *Shaking Hands* deserves a wide readership, who will be dazzled by a new perspective on the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

Ruth Morgan
University of Western Australia