

Becoming Colonial

The Paper War: Morality, Print Culture, and Power in Colonial NSW

By Anna Johnston

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Reviewed by Rachael Weaver

GOING BY ITS TITLE ALONE, ANNA JOHNSTON'S RECENT BOOK *THE PAPER WAR: Morality, Print Culture, and Power in Colonial New South Wales*, might be mistaken for something like a history of rivalry and scandal in the colonial Australian presses. Instead, the book is a tightly focussed study of the life and colonial experiences of Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld in the years 1825-41. Threlkeld was a member of the London Missionary Society, who ran the abortive Lake Macquarie mission in colonial New South Wales. Johnston's account of his time there presents us with a complex figure; one who was simultaneously outspoken, difficult, self-sabotaging and intriguing. The 'paper war' of the title is Threlkeld's own phrase, which he used to describe the mass of writing that was generated around him, mainly as the result of controversies of his own making. It is this mass of writing—of texts including personal and official correspondence, diary entries, newspaper articles, institutional reports, legal documents, and published pamphlets—which makes up the colonial archive that *The Paper War* mines so thoroughly as well as thoughtfully.

Johnston's introduction, 'Colonial Archives and Textuality,' gives careful consideration to the formulation of the archive itself. Drawing broadly on works by historian Tony Ballantyne, among many others, she understands the imperial archive—to crudely summarise—as a web of correspondence and exchange at once drawn together (catalogued and stored) and widely dispersed (spread across diverse international networks, readers, texts, institutions and so on). Her approach is literary—conceiving of her material as a set of writing and reading practices—though the book focuses exclusively on non-fiction accounts. Citing American studies scholar Robert Blair St George, she aims to uncover 'new pasts that reveal the cultural processes of becoming colonial,' emphasising that these pasts are always created rather than discovered.

The Paper War highlights Threlkeld's position as someone caught between the interests of white and Aboriginal cultures, at a time of transformation from largely penal to settler interests, arguing that his case offers a highly charged site through which to view 'the strange and difficult birth of the early settler state.' Moreover, it shows that Threlkeld's capacity to generate controversy has been long lasting, relating his appearance as a minor player in the 'history wars.' Johnston's introduction briefly rehearses Threlkeld's role in debates between Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle, but she saves her much more engaging intervention in them for the conclusion. Perhaps it is only after the book has traced Threlkeld's disputes with his contemporaries and charted the complexity of his relationship with Aboriginal peoples that the nuances of his position could be properly drawn out. But this also seems like a missed opportunity—to carry the reader along through the intricacies of the source materials with a much more vivid idea of Threlkeld's relevance to contemporary cultural history.

Chapter one, 'Colonial Morality,' provides Threlkeld's biography, as well as mapping a network of affluent humanitarian and religious men involved in the formation and dissolution of the Lake Macquarie mission. This 'imperial web' included figures such as the Sydney-based LMS deputation of Rev. Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet who had established the mission, Rev. Samuel Marsden, LMS director for the southern hemisphere, John Dunmore Lang, a Presbyterian clergyman and social commentator, among others. Johnston's account builds a strong sense of Threlkeld's progression from early agitator—working against the grain of the LMS hierarchies to secure a posting that matched his ambitions—to outright antagonist, in his public clashes with the likes of Marsden and Lang over the everyday running of the mission. It also highlights Threlkeld's pioneering contribution to colonial linguistics, as one of the first Europeans to study Aboriginal languages. His relationship and close collaborations with an Aboriginal man, Biraban, are one of the most fascinating aspects of his story.

This first, biographical chapter then forms the kernel to which the following chapters return, each drawing out different aspects of the story, or, as Johnston phrases it, providing 'a detailed analysis of each of the nodes of the imperial archive in which Threlkeld's work and writing were embedded.' *The Paper War* is unashamedly scholarly and deeply serious about this kind of infrastructure. The chapter titles: 'Colonial Linguistics,' 'Colonial Press,' and so on might appear rather top-heavy, focused unwaveringly on the book's overall frameworks. But the readings they offer are flexible and nuanced, breathing life into the archive itself, and taking the material in diverse directions through broad-ranging research.

The second chapter examines Threlkeld's linguistic work, observing the way such practices of documentation were implicated in the global imperial processes of domination, at the same time as elaborating Threlkeld's advocacy for Aboriginal people faced with settler violence. Chapter Three explores in detail Threlkeld's circulation through the colonial presses, in terms of the media attention given to running of the mission as well as his involvement in controversy surrounding the execution of an Aboriginal man in 1827. In a religious struggle upon the scaffold, a Catholic priest had sought to baptise the condemned man. The chapter ranges over the role and meaning of executions in settler communities as well as the aftermath of this particular event in the colonial newspapers. Moral and religious debates between Threlkeld and Lang over the affair are carefully traced, giving a strong sense of print culture's essential role in a colonial community's self-fashioning.

Chapter Four, 'Colonial Respectability,' discusses the libel case *Threlkeld vs Lang*, 1838, providing a larger picture of the pervasiveness of civil prosecution in the colonial courts and the importance of preserving one's public reputation. Also crucial here is Threlkeld's 1828 circulation of an explosive pamphlet reproducing personal correspondence he had received from Marsden and others with added commentary, in response to criticisms over what was seen as his excessive expenditure. In teasing out the implications of these events, Johnston compellingly explores questions of social mobility, colonial etiquette, the epistolary mode, newspaper publicity and much more. Chapter Five, 'Colonial Legality,' examines Threlkeld's role, with Biraban, as translator in legal cases involving Aboriginal people. It charts Threlkeld's increasingly critical stance, and elaborates the impact of these early cases upon questions of Aboriginal people's legal subjectivity under British law. As already mentioned, the conclusion, 'Colonial Historicity,' goes on to locate these questions within the 'history wars;' but it *relocates* them, really—since, in rigorously unpacking and analysing Threlkeld's story, Johnston's book has worked to shift the frame of the debate far away from conceptions of colonial heroes or villains, in order 'to generate subtle and nuanced understandings of the complex role of representation in colonialism and its aftermath.' In its project to re-conceive understandings of the Lake Macquarie mission archive—and in its broader contribution to the way these kinds of archival readings are approached—*The Paper War* achieves exactly what it sets out to.

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