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BOOK REVIEW

Kate Fullagar explores three diverse individuals marked by empire

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This book explores the lives of three men who hailed from different corners of the globe: Cherokee 'warrior-diplomat' Ostenaco, British 'artist-philosopher' Joshua Reynolds, and Raʻiatean 'man on a mission' Mai. Historians have never studied the lives of these three individuals in conjunction before, perhaps because their only direct link is the fact that Reynolds painted portraits of Ostenaco and Mai, albeit twelve years apart. Even the two paintings have rarely been discussed together. While Mai's 1774 portrait is considered a British 'national treasure', Ostenaco's remains little studied, and mostly regarded as an 'ethnographic artefact' (3).

In this richly detailed biographical study, Kate Fullagar brings the three men's stories together, emphasising that despite their different backgrounds and ambitions, the lives of all three were marked by a shared 'connection to British imperialism' (4). This central connection means that the book is not just a biography, but also offers a compelling new take on the British Empire which centres Indigenous perspectives in complex and nuanced ways that go beyond exploring 'whether empire was "good" or not' (5) for the three protagonists. Fullagar reveals that ambivalent responses to empire in the eighteenth century were not confined to the better-known cases of philosophers and humanitarians but were shared by more seemingly conservative types such as Reynolds. Reynolds established his reputation through portraits of imperial and military figures, and, more significantly, Indigenous people who also responded to British incursions in their lands in varied ways. As she reminds us, the 'British empire did not rise like the sun, uncontested by either its perpetrators or victims' (7).

The chapters on Reynolds reveal the creeping effects of imperialism over the course of his early life, from the growing list of household consumables and daily cultures it enabled, to the increasing importance of the navy, especially in Reynolds' Plymouth, which was a key naval hub. Yet he nonetheless felt some unease about Britain's expansion, which, Fullagar suggests, was expressed through his desire to move beyond painting empire's military men, and instead look for a new kind of subject. This is what led him to Ostenaco in 1762 on the latter's diplomatic mission to London. As with Reynolds' early life, Fullagar highlights the staggered effects of imperialism on Ostenaco's Cherokee world, through trade, the Cherokee involvement in the Seven Years' War, and escalating cycles of settler

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violence which led to brutal war in South Carolina. Fullagar argues that Indigenous dispossession was 'a bumpier and more negotiated process on the ground' (6) than histories usually suggest. Ostenaco journeyed to Britain hoping to negotiate peace and the resumption of trade, while Virginian lieutenant governor Fauquier (who wrote letters of introduction) hoped that Ostenaco would be awed by British 'grandeur' and 'warlike power' (79). Ostenaco did not appear impressed with what he saw in London. Nonetheless, he proved to be a popular figure, with many elites having to queue for an audience. Fullagar admits that there are no records of how Reynolds managed to negotiate a sitting, nor any details of what Ostenaco made of the experience nor his impressions of Reynolds. Reading into Reynolds' attempt to bury the painting, however, leads Fullagar to conjecture that Ostenaco challenged Reynolds' principles on 'the universals of human life' (128) by being too individual, with characteristics that were too particular. Fullagar reads Ostenaco's disruptive agency in Reynolds' portrait, an intriguing example of what Bronwen Douglas describes as an 'indigenous countersign' (in Jolly et al. 2009, *Oceanic Encounters*, 2009, 175).

Over a decade later, Mai, like Ostenaco, was also a visitor to London with political ambitions, this time to garner British support to free Raʻiatea from neighbouring Bora Boran invaders. Unlike Reynolds and Ostenaco, Mai's experience with the British Empire was more sporadic, experienced through a series of explorer visits to Tahiti, where he was exiled. As a youth he had met the crew of Cook's *Endeavour* when it visited Matavai Bay. When Cook returned on his second voyage, Mai saw a strategic opportunity to try forge an alliance to oust the Bora Borans. Fullagar sees Mai as 'playing a long game', realising that he needed to travel to Britain to 'gather up arms, maybe some manpower too' (154). Once in London, he too sat for Reynolds, by now the founding president of the Royal Academy of Arts. Again, the details of this meeting can only be speculated on, but it seems that this was a more mutually satisfactory experience. Mai recognised that having one's portrait painted was 'respectable' (204), and his dress and comportment tallied better with Reynolds' neoclassical aesthetics. Despite this seemingly more successful portrait, Fullagar contends that Mai, like Ostenaco, nonetheless defied Reynolds' intent of both capturing the essential sameness of humanity *and* exhibiting Britons' 'power over some of them' (209) (emphasis in original).

In these studies of Ostenaco and Mai, Fullagar's ambitious whole-of-life approach to biography really shines. Biographers' and historians' reliance on written, western sources means that detailed biographical studies of Indigenous figures are particularly challenging and need to be tackled in creative ways lest they uncritically reproduce colonial views. Fullagar's method combines rich historical contextualisation and informed speculation, evidenced by ethnohistorical sources and sympathetic readings of Ostenaco's and Mai's motives and interests. While Reynolds' portraits of the two men are the hinges linking all three characters, Fullagar's approach decentres empire from the stories of Ostenaco's and Mai's lives, and provides a richer, and fuller perspective on these compelling individuals.

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