



Review Article

Review essay: Indigeneity, exploration and empire

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Kate Fullagar is well known as a leading voice on the history of empire in Oceania and North America, focusing on Indigenous-British interactions in all their complexity. Fullagar interrogates the lived experience of empire, allowing for an examination of the political, religious, social, and cultural resonances that fed into moments that were sometimes momentous, sometimes quotidian, but always instructive. She defamiliarizes the reader with empire, allowing one to step back – to question mechanisms of power and of individual agency, to grasp that empire was never monolithic or inevitable, and to see how it was, and continues to be, constantly negotiated, contested, and remade.

Her two most recent books continue this imperial interrogation through the medium of biography. Building on other recent interest in the possibilities of biography for empire studies, this methodology allows her to go beyond the false equivalence, or ‘at least costar status’ granted to Europeans in encounter history to focus instead on entire lives, keeping ‘Indigenous people the main characters in their history’.¹ *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist: Three Lives in an Age of Empire* (2020) looks at the intertwined activities of Ostenaco (1710–1780), a Cherokee leader and diplomat (the warrior); Mai (c. 1753–1779), a Ra’iatean refugee (the voyager); and Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), eighteenth-century London’s premier portraitist (the artist). *Bennelong and Phillip: A History Unravelling* (2023) tells two life stories backwards, from death to birth, to free both Bennelong (d.1813) and Arthur Phillip (1738–1814) from the roles their memories have been forced into over two centuries of empire and nation building in Australia. Such legacies often calcify our understanding of historical actors, a torpor Fullagar hopes to shake off with her

original approach to life writing. In both works, she stresses that, while empire was intrusive and destructive for all three Indigenous peoples she studies, it was also never total.

Her examination of warrior, voyager, and artist is a braiding together of three previously unconnected lives. Reynolds painted both Ostenaco and Mai when they visited London; the portrait of Mai is likely to be known to the reader, Ostenaco’s is not. Ostenaco came to London in 1762 as part of a peace delegation following the Anglo-Cherokee War (1758–61). Mai was a Ra’iatean man who joined James Cook, then on his second voyage, as he passed through Tahiti in 1773. Their stories, like many eighteenth-century lives, are based on partial, incomplete, or biased sources. However, as Fullagar points out, this is the case for all peoples, including Europeans. Scholars would do well to ensure their skepticism is consistently applied. She explains, ‘However much reality we can accept from the sources for a colonial history might also be the case for an Indigenous history’.²

This volume is structured much like a play, with a prologue, interlude, and epilogue. The chapters offer scenes from each life to illustrate the interstices of empire in the mid-eighteenth century. This is done not because such entanglements are extraordinary, but because they have become increasingly common precisely at this moment. A major contribution is to offer biographies of Ostenaco and Mai, who have been less studied than Reynolds. For the latter, Fullagar has brought empire to bear on his paintings, showing his ambivalence to British expansion. This focus seems obvious in hindsight after reading Fullagar’s riveting analysis of not only Ostenaco’s and Mai’s portraits, but of those of Augustus Keppel (1725–1786), Robert Orme (1728–1801), and others, as well as the rival and evolving imperial philosophies of Reynolds’ great friends, Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) and Edmund Burke (1729–1797). This structure and analytical approach show how alive the debate about empire was from the Pacific to the Appalachians to Leicester Fields.

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¹ Kate Fullagar, *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist: Three Lives in an Age of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 8. For more on empire and biography, see Malte Rolf and Benedikt Tondera, ‘Imperial Biographies Revisited’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 68 (2020) 270–281; Achim von Oppen and Silke Strickrodt, ‘Introduction: Biographies Between Spheres of Empire’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 44 (2016) 717–729. For a recent reflection on biography and geography, see Elizabeth Baigent, ‘“The uses of biography”: Life writing and geography’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 85 (2024) 24–27.

² Fullagar, *The Warrior*, p. 13.

The epilogue of *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist* follows each protagonist to their respective deaths in their homelands. This is the point at which *Bennelong and Phillip* intriguingly begins, with the end of the two men who are inexorably tied to the establishment of the colony of New South Wales; they are 'emblems of broader settler-Indigenous encounters'.³ Fullagar wishes to combat this reductive, emblematic narrative, which she sees as trapping both men in different ways. Phillip swelters under the aura of his founder status, while Bennelong is usually diminished with a story of inevitable deterioration.

Like Reynolds, Phillip is shown to have experienced empire as an important part of his life. He does not exhibit Reynolds' hesitation or ambivalence, however. New South Wales was but one part of a long career in the service of a 'galloping global empire'.⁴ Like Ostenaco and Mai, by providing a full biography of Bennelong, Fullagar can show that his life did not lead up to and then diminish after his initial interactions with Europeans.

Her second goal in this work is to challenge the form of history writing itself. Citing especially Priya Satia's influential *Time's Monster* (2020), Fullagar ties forward-moving narrative to empire, a connection that allows the violence of systemic domination to be elided.⁵ Like her other multi-biography, this is an 'experiment in trying to move beyond the limitations of typical Western ways of writing about the past – ways that have often seemed so innocent of politics but which have long privileged the colonizer over the colonised'.⁶

For these two books, the experiments are successful and thought-provoking. While the reverse biography may not become a popular template, it does force the reader to reassess assumptions and causation. A braided biography brings multiple lives into conversation at once, but the balance of such a narrative is a constant challenge. History is lumpy, and these are but two ways to reshape it, to understand it anew. In the case of all five individuals examined across these works, they are not presented as over-archingly imperial lives, but as lives in which empire was significant in specific ways – that is, biography is used as a way to analyze empire.

These are also timely works, as empire continues to be a polemic in current affairs as well as historical study. Elsewhere, Fullagar has

offered a cogent discussion of the current state of James Cook (1728–1779) studies, which continues to boom in large part due to the 250th anniversaries of his three voyages (1768–1780). Cook is a figure who, more than Reynolds and even Phillip, flounders under the weight of national and imperial scripts. In many books about Cook, Fullagar identifies a persistent 'unwillingness to allow eighteenth-century Pacific worlds to compare equally with Cook's world'.⁷ In these two creative biographies, Fullagar attempts to do the opposite, ascribing equal curiosity, intelligence, and sophistication to all parties.

In doing so, she offers a helpful intervention in the culture wars still raging about the legacies of empire. In Australia, there was a peak in the debate with the failed 2023 resolution to create an Indigenous Voice to Parliament that would have recognized greater rights for Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. In Britain, museums and heritage sites continue to serve as ground zero for discussions about how empire should be interpreted. Individual objects are caught up in these discussions, including Mai's portrait (c. 1776) by Reynolds which, following a public appeal to fund its purchase in 2023 – 'the largest acquisition the UK has ever made,' is now jointly owned with the Getty.⁸

Fullagar fully understands the ways in which empire can spark debate and emotion. Within these prescient and necessary discussions, she makes a plea for the historicity of past peoples; none of her subjects 'fitted easily into modern ideas about selves'. While legacies of imperialism should be debated, and its systemic nature examined minutely, personal ties and stories remain, 'perhaps these are not for the historian at all but belong solely to community and kin'.⁹ Her recent podcast series with Michael McDonnell asks what we learn from European portraits of Indigenous peoples; in its final episode, they talk to contemporary Indigenous artists Michael Tuffery and Daniel Boyd about how they have used portraiture to speak back to these histories, which are often personal and still part of their lived experience today.¹⁰ These two books together argue for the messiness and contingency of historical empire, but are also a testament to the multiplicity of ways in which empire continues to operate, and be resisted, today. In trying to destabilize founding myths and reorient the conversation, Fullagar is making space for more stories.

³ Kate Fullagar, *Bennelong and Phillip: A History Unravelling* (Cammeray: Scribner, 2023), p. 1.

⁴ Fullagar, *Bennelong and Phillip*, p. 7.

⁵ Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁶ Fullagar, *Bennelong and Phillip*, p. 8.

⁷ Kate Fullagar, 'Remembering Cook, Again: The State of a Mixed-Media Field', *Australian Historical Studies* 52 (2021) 611–631 (p. 614).

⁸ Simon Stephens, 'Campaign to jointly acquire portrait by Reynolds reaches £50 m target', *Museums Journal* 28 April 2023, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2023/04/campaign-to-jointly-acquire-portrait-by-reynolds-reaches-50m-target/#>.

⁹ Both quotes from Fullagar, *The Warrior*, p. 251.

¹⁰ Kate Fullagar and Michael McDonnell, 'Faces Today: Indigenous Artists Return the Gaze', History Lab podcast (26 March 2025), <https://impactstudios.edu.au/podcast/history-lab/s6/3-faces-today-indigenous-artists-return-the-gaze/>.