Week 20: Australia and the Pacific

Malcolm Nicolson, Medicine and racial politics: changing images of the New Zealand Maori in the nineteenth century

- The perception of the Maori was constructed in large part from a variety of ‘conventions’ that did not necessarily conform to the observed realities. Early contacts were informed by aspects such as 18th century art and philosophy on the ‘Noble Savage’ and so views of the Maori were often positive.
- Yet these perceptions of the Maori evolved over time in accordance with the objectives of the European settlers who encountered them. The notion of the ‘Noble Savage’ was applied to the Maori but was then changed twisted and then outright discarded as a way to view the population by European settlers. Missionaries for example viewed the Maori as plagued by sin by were nonetheless saveable.
- Disconnect between early settlers and later settlers. Early settlers tended to interact with the Maori on a more equal and commercial basis. Early government policy rested on the idea of ‘racial amalgamation’ which hoped to prevent the decline of the Maori population whilst pursuing a policy of ‘Europeanization’.
- Interestingly imperial funds were used to build fully integrated hospitals for both Maori and Europeans. Maori at least appeared to have equal rights to the settler population.
- Post 1850s relations between settlers and Maori worsened drastically. The settler population, particularly its doctors, began to argue that Maori were biologically weaker which was fuelled by the ‘vogue for Social Darwinism’ and changed from a ‘Noble Savage’ to a ‘Dying Savage’.

“It should of course be always borne in mind that the policy of amalgamation, although it purported to treat the Maori as, at least potentially, the equal of the settler in questions of civil rights, was in fact firmly based upon the assumption of the absolute superiority of the European and his institutions.”

T. Griffiths, The Stone Age, Hunters and collectors: the antiquarian imagine in Australia

- The term ‘Stone Age’ was the most popular term to describe the state of Aboriginal culture. It reinforced an idea of the Aborigines as stuck in time, incapable of progression along European lines.
- This term ‘Stone Age’ and its application to Aborigines, however, rested largely on the European obsession for stone artefacts and fit into the 19th century vogue of geology and palaeontology. Collection of stone artefacts was thus informed by new research trends which combined natural history with geological history.
- This was reinforced by another cultural argument that argued the Aborigines had no antiquity and were consequently defined by a propensity towards the primitive.
- Many ‘collectors’ of Aboriginal artefacts were amateurs who sought to advance an understanding of ‘cultural hierarchies’ as opposed to ‘parallels’. Due to a lack of knowledge, many of these ‘collectors’ were unable to decipher much of the information they collected.
- The issue with many of these ‘collectors’ was the contradiction inherent in their work. They sought to preserve a culture that whilst they acknowledged their presence and their rights to the land, they systematically reduced Aboriginal culture to a fixed ‘prehistoric’ stage in humanity.

“The acceptance of Aboriginal survival was an acknowledgment of them as historical beings, and so opened the way for acceptance of the antiquity of their occupation. Extinction and lack of antiquity were related beliefs; they were both traits of a timeless people.”

A New World? Two Hundred Years of Public Health in Australia and New Zealand – Linda Bryder

- British medical practice was used extensively in Australia and New Zealand with many medical professionals in the region having been taught at British universities.
- Belief among those in Britain that the Australian and New Zealand environment was conducive to good health as well as to a good lifestyle. The belief that poverty was non existent.
- This however may not have been the case at all and was an image of the rural Australia regions. Cities had very similar levels of illness to British cities as well as comparable infant mortality rates.
- There was a feeling in Australia going into the 20th century that public health had to be kept in order to make sure the white race maintained control of the region. There was a fear of Japanese expansion which many felt put the future of white control over the region under threat.
- Indigenous health was largely neglected, with policies focusing on assimilation rather than addressing specific health needs.
- The public health response to epidemics was often reactionary, with little sustained commitment to reform.

"The empty spaces of the Australian continent had to be filled to keep it in white hands. The Commission claimed that the 'newborn child is our best immigrant', a frequently repeated slogan." (page 318)

From the Deserts the Prophets Come - Warwick Anderson

- Attempts to convince those in Europe that the Australian climate was a great place to live and that it was not dangerous, as some had feared
- While there was a vision from many colonists of a white Australia, prior to the 20th century there was a resistance from white Europeans to move to the region. This continued into the early 1900s with many beginning to wonder if “full bloods” and “half-castes” would ever be completely dominated by the white man
- The slow population growth of whites in the region led to far more inspection of natives in the region. Racial science was used extensively to portray these individuals as brutes and less civilised.
- Maintained belief in the inevitable extinction of the aboriginal australians because of their inferior genetics/race.
- The study of Aboriginal bodies was often more about defining whiteness than understanding Aboriginal health or culture.
- There was an attempt to portray natives as a degenerated version of the caucasian race, with many experiments and studies being carried out that claimed to prove the existence of “*“tawny” natives and “white blood” in even the most deceptively dark of the blacks.*”

It appeared that the University of Adelaide expeditions were confirming earlier, scattered speculation that Aborigines were in fact “archaic” or “dark” Caucasians.’ As Grenfell Price reported, “Blood tests appear to show that the Aborigine is akin to the white man.”?

British Anthropological Thought in Colonial Practice: the appropriation of Indigenous Australian bodies, 1860-1880-Paul Turnbull

- The procurement of Indigenous Australian remains began soon after British colonisation, but it intensified after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Scientists sought skeletal evidence to support theories of human difference and evolution
- A split in the Ethnological Society led to the formation of the Anthropological Society of London, led by James Hunt and C. Carter Blake. This group believed racial differences were biologically fixed and sought to discredit evolutionary explanations
- Scientists relied on colonial officials, museum curators, and doctors to acquire remains, often through grave desecration. Some collectors justified their actions by arguing that Aboriginal Australians were on the brink of extinction
- By the early 1880s, Darwinian evolutionary theory had become widely accepted in British anthropology. However, both evolutionary and polygenist perspectives contributed to the entrenchment of scientific racism in colonial policies

"The apparent correspondence of theory and experience had sinister consequences. It not only stimulated the plunder of Aboriginal burial places and scientific trafficking in bodily remains but strengthened white perceptions that the Aboriginal body itself proved the reality of profound and insurmountable biological differences between indigenous Australians and colonial settlers"

Questions

How often was the supposed objective observation of the pacific really just an attempt to further already established narratives? Did anybody observe Australia and the Pacific in a way that was free from ulterior motives?

How did a medical and cultural understandings of indigenous communities influence the policy directed towards them by the British Empire and the settlers?