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## Title:

**Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'Jane Lydon on Empathy and Empire': Review of *Imperial Emotions. The Politics of Empathy across the British Empire*, by Jane Lydon, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, xiii+221 pp, AUD\$ 136.95.**

## Review:

Emotions have been integral to the making and unmaking of empire. Emotional standards, expressions and experiences form part of those practices that constitute Catherine Hall's 'cultures of empire'. They are used to construct and define relationships and boundaries. They have been drawn on to characterise communities as more or less 'human' and therefore more or less deserving of certain emotional responses. In her new book, *Imperial Emotions*, Jane Lydon capitalises on concepts like emotions as practices, emotional communities and emotional economies – those conceived by Monique Sheer, Barbara Rosenwein and Sara Ahmed – to explore the role played by 'empathy' in imperial relations.

Broadly construed, Lydon writes, empathy refers to 'the constellation of sympathetic emotions' including compassion, pity and Adam Smith's concept of 'fellow-feeling' (2). *Imperial Emotions* explores how emotions were used to create connections between self and other, as well as to maintain the distinctions between those of different cultures, thereby justifying colonialism. It does so by examining changing ideas about which subjects of empire were worthy enough to feel *for* and *with*, over the course of British colonialism in Australasia. What results is a fascinating account of the developing emotional relations, negative and positive, between white settlers and Indigenous inhabitants that draws on a wealth of literary and visual sources, from art and photography to fiction, travel writing and journals.

The book is divided into seven chapters which span the period from the last decades of the eighteenth century to the waning years of the twentieth century. It reconstructs an emotional landscape which stretches from invasion and violent conquest – when the Australasian colonies were in their imperial infancy – to the more recent passionate but failed Australian republican campaign – when it seemed that the nation refused to 'come of age'. Chapter One analyses the changing emotive familial ties of empire. It situates the young but maturing colonial offspring as a perceived threat to the parent society, while acknowledging that settlers could only legitimise their conquest and colonisation through indulging in dreams about the inevitable disappearance of the Aboriginal people. Chapter Two, on imagining frontier violence, takes a much closer look at the devastating impact that these colonial fantasies had on the Indigenous population. At the same time, through paying attention to a growing discourse of humanitarianism, it traces how images of frontier violence were variously harnessed to garner sympathy for the Indigenous population, on one hand, and settlers, on the other.

Chapters Three and Four position Harriet Beecher Stowe's American *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Charles Dickens's British *Bleak House* (1853) as opponents on the theme of concern for black populations. Whereas some colonists connected sympathy for the African American slave with that for Indigenous Australians (for example, on the basis of brutal treatment, the grief of child removal), many others failed to countenance any parallels. Not only that, but in Britain philanthropic concern for the non-white subject 'away from home', while white working-class children starved 'at home', produced a backlash epitomised by Dickens' scathing satirical commentary. The use of imagery, such as emotive drawings of metropolitan street urchins, is highly effective here in exposing the national and international politics of empathy. Chapters Five and Six turn to the works and views of missionaries. Using the figure of Reverend John Brown Gribble, Lydon focuses on the emotional tactics of imperial evangelical networks, especially compassion for the plight of the Aboriginal people and condemnation of their inhumane treatment. The final chapter of the book turns to a topic of seemingly enduring fascination, the British Royal Family. Cautioning

us not to disregard the oft-condemned as frivolous phenomenon of royal-watching, Lydon argues that emotional connection with this hereditary celebrity unit has helped to undermine the push for a republic in Australia.

A few minor issues detract from the book's otherwise excellence. For example, the title is somewhat misleading. It is not the expansive category of the emotions of imperialism that is under scrutiny but rather the role of empathy in directing relations in the Australasian colonies, mostly Australia, and Britain. The sub-title, *The Politics of Empathy across the British Empire*, hits closer to the mark but still hints at a wider geographic focus. Perhaps more pointedly, one of the arguments underlying the book – that scholars still find it difficult to take emotions seriously, based on a historic belief in the opposition of emotion and reason – is a little overstated. While I agree that, generally, many continue to regard emotions as feminised and weak, scholars of emotions have certainly overcome these apprehensions. Sociologists have moved on from discussing the emotion-reason binary and many historians have followed suite.

These are small quibbles for the book that Lydon produces is both masterly and thoughtful. Rigorously researched and beautifully written, *Imperial Emotions* delivers a balanced historical appraisal of the benefits and limits of feeling for others. The book cautions readers against adopting a congratulatory approach to outpourings of 'outrage, shock and shame' elicited, for example, by the release of damning reports like *Bringing Them Home* (1997). Such emotional expressions facilitate the drawing of a line between past and present, and run the risk of consigning the cruelties of colonialism to that past. On the other hand, the author intreats readers not to overlook 'empathy's radical social potential' (99). Therefore, while the book offers an intellectual critique of the limits of empathy because of the power imbalances such feelings reveal or rest on, it also argues that a lack of sympathetic feeling is much more disturbing, both now and in the past.