



International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies

Volume 9, Number 2, 2016

Book Review: *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia*

By Dane Kennedy, Harvard University Press, Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College, United States, 2013, ISBN 9780674503861.

Reviewed by Greg Blyton
Senior Lecturer
University of Newcastle

Quality research, innovative and provocative. American historian Dane Kennedy's *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia* delivers a carefully written comparative history of British exploration that challenges romantic conceptualisations of explorer and Indigenous relations in the nineteenth century. The very title '*The Last Blank Spaces*' conjures up images of terra nullius. The final frontiers in British exploration of two vast continents, an emptiness "to advance imperial agendas, to pre-empt political rivals, to inspire patriotic pride, to discover natural resources, to promote commercial interests and further humanitarian objectives" (p. 60). *The Last Blank Spaces* fits into a genre of Indigenous, colonial ethnography when the British explorer is the central character and the Indigenous person is a support, but the book differs from conventional Western accounts. Kennedy writes that it is a book that "traces the development of exploration from an idea to a practice, from a practice to an outcome, and from an outcome to a myth" (p. 23).

The Last Blank Spaces is a strong "rebuttal to [sic] the nostalgic view of African and Australian exploration" of imperial histories, which portray European explorers as "autonomous agents whose achievements are derived from their personal reservoirs of will and courage" and "ignore the evidence of their dependence on indigenous intermediaries" (p. 268). Kennedy asserts that the ethnocentric perception of racial superiority starts with the explorer and their egocentric recordings of expeditions. *The Last Blank Spaces* dismisses the ideological Eurocentric motif of the superior Robinson Crusoe and subservient native Friday as being more in the realm of romanticism than reality. Kennedy writes, "if power was knowledge, then indigenous intermediaries often possessed far more than explorers were able to admit, since it undermined their own reputations" (p. 163). *The Last Blank Spaces* recognises a legitimate Indigenous knowledge and, through this knowledge, power as being with Indigenous intermediaries and not the sole domain of the heroic explorer stereotype. In the field of exploration, a reality exists that rejects the romanticism of the intrepid and heroic, European explorer and the obedient, subservient, Indigenous support.

An imperial search for scientific knowledge is a central theme throughout the book, but it is a knowledge with limitations. An important inference from *The Last Blank Spaces* is a notion that knowledge held by British explorers during an expedition was often inept and limited. "For while explorers were culturally conditioned to reject these alternative epistemologies as the superstitions of primitive peoples, force of necessity caused many of them to acquire greater

appreciation for [sic] the skills and insights these people possessed” (p. 61). *The Last Blank Spaces* goes a step further and suggests that knowledge gained by explorers from ‘local’ intermediaries often ended up in journals of expeditions with an inference that “exploration was a far more collaborative enterprise than the explorers themselves were wont to acknowledge” (p. 158). Kennedy’s work is an important shift forward in the recognition of Indigenous people in Africa and Australia, and the critical role they played in both coast and land exploration of these respective continents. *The Last Blank Spaces* also contains an important acknowledgment that the intellectual property of Indigenous people was a critical component of the data gained by explorers on expeditions. Local knowledge!

In *The Last Blank Spaces*, Kennedy is quite clinical in his approach to the evidence and relations between British explorers and Indigenous intermediaries. He systematically analyses the traditional, Western historiography of European exploration and encounters with Indigenous people in Africa and Australia. He then scrutinises primary sources, including numerous journals and notebooks left by nineteenth century European explorers, wherein he carefully examines the relationships between explorers and Indigenous people. *The Last Blank Spaces* draws two major conclusions that are contestable. The first conclusion is that African explorers were more reliant on Indigenous support than their Australian counterparts in both land and sea exploration. Kennedy has made a comprehensive study of Australian primary sources, but the limitations are apparent because he has missed significant information. For example, Kennedy makes three references to English explorer Matthew Flinders, but omits to mention that Bungaree, arguably the first Aboriginal Australian person to circumnavigate the coast of the continent accompanied the Flinders. The second conclusion that, in many cases, “explorers from both continents were weak and vulnerable” (p. 5) is certainly applicable in the context of Australian, colonial exploration, although the notion is not without challenge. A significant number of Australian explorers were far from ‘weak and vulnerable’, such as hardened military men like Thomas Mitchell and John Oxley who were well-armed with guns and explored large sectors of New South Wales in the first half of the nineteenth century without local intermediaries. However, the author’s claims of vulnerability do match the criteria with a number of famed Australian colonial explorers. For example, Kennedy’s analysis of the relationship between the highly acclaimed, Prussian scientist, Dr Ludwig Leichardt and Aboriginal Australian guides, Harry Brown and Charlie Fisher, support the author’s claims of reliance. Leichardt’s intermediary, Charlie Fisher, highlights the essentiality of Aboriginal Australian support and recognition of Leichardt’s utmost dependency upon him. While Leichardt is berating Fisher for the alleged misdemeanour of returning late to the campsite, “Fisher responded by striking Leichardt in [sic] the jaw, dislodging several of his teeth” (p. 161). Kennedy notes that, “given the racial structure of power relations in colonial Australia, an act of this kind often carried a terrible penalty; the black men who assaulted white bosses could pay for their transgressions with their lives” (p. 161). All Leichardt does is to temporarily expel Fisher from the expedition party, “figuring that his prospects of survival were slim” (p. 161) without his Indigenous support. From the Eurocentric, imperial perspective, the servant has struck the master, yet the master is so dependent on the servant that he must ultimately accept the assault.

The Last Blank Spaces challenges “standard assumptions about the roles such guides played in relation to European explorers who were their self-ascribed masters” (p. 159). Kennedy highlights this anomaly throughout his study bringing to the reader’s attention “just how far race relations among members of the expedition had diverged from the hierarchical pattern that conventionally governed dealings between blacks and whites in Australia” (p. 161). The author asserts that, in many cases, Indigenous guides were, in

fact, actually directing expeditions as the real leaders. Another important observation Kennedy makes when examining Australian historiography is the negligence of historians in acknowledging Indigenous people in exploration. For example, the author points out that, aside from Leichhardt's brief mentions to Brown "being a member of the 'Newcastle Tribe' and Fisher a member of the 'Bathurst Tribe', we know almost nothing about their backgrounds (p. 159). *The Last Blank Spaces* also recognises the absence of the Indigenous voice in the Western narrative history of imperial exploration as being a limitation. These might seem minor observations, but, in the broad sweep of Western historiography, few historians have provided this important insight. Kennedy notes of the primary sources in *The Last Blank Spaces* that

although this evidence has its limitations, most notably the absence of any direct testimony by the guides themselves, it offers a rare and revealing glimpse into the ways that race, power, and knowledge intersected and informed relations between explorers and guides. (p. 162)

The Last Blank Spaces is highly recommended for researchers investigating Indigenous, colonial, ethnographic history in Africa and Australia during the nineteenth century. It is a book that serves more as a reference source, rather than a popular history. Nevertheless, it contains a lively writing style and, combined with an astute selection of interesting sources, makes *The Last Blank Spaces* an excellent read. The scope of Kennedy's work is remarkable, covering British exploration in two vast continents over a one hundred year period, wherein the author supersedes earlier ethnocentric histories dominated by romanticised visions of Eurocentric exclusivity. Published by Harvard University Press in 2013, *The Last Blank Spaces* contains eight chapters, complemented by a list of maps and illustrations, including portraits of both European explorers and Indigenous intermediaries from Africa and Australia. The book has a good index, supplemented by 38 pages of endnotes, and an impressive bibliography containing numerous journals, letters and notebooks written by British explorers. These primary sources reveal important details about relations between explorers and Indigenous people, particularly those intermediaries who accompanied explorers on expeditions in both continents during the nineteenth century. It is a very useful and innovative addition to the library of teaching and to research academics involved in global, cultural studies surrounding British imperialism and Indigenous people in the nineteenth century.