

Furphy, Samuel.
Edward M. Curr and the Tide of History.
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In 2002, Yorta Yorta native title claimants from northern Victoria were told by High Court supreme justices that they were not really Aboriginal, and had therefore lost any claim to their lands on the Murray River. In the original 1998 decision in the Victorian Supreme Court, the presiding judge Justice Olney wrote that the ‘tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of their traditional laws and any real observance of their traditional customs’ (191). His decision was ultimately upheld. The main source for much of Justice Olney’s knowledge of pre-contact Yorta Yorta customs was a very readable book entitled *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*, written in 1883 by Edward M. Curr (1820–89), an early pastoralist in the region. Samuel Furphy’s *Edward M. Curr and the Tide of History* is a biography of Curr, and an important contribution to the question of whose stories we accept as the history of our land.

Furphy spent most of his childhood in the same region in which Curr settled, and the book is based on his doctoral thesis at the University of Melbourne. It is the first book-

length biography of Curr, and is a chronological account of the man, his writing, and his roles in colonial Victorian public life. Furphy's project began with a concern that Curr's reputation in twentieth-century historiography as one who was 'atypically sympathetic' towards Aboriginal people, as the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography puts it, is misinformed. This reputation stems largely from Curr's *Recollections*, a nostalgic and humorous book that Curr wrote forty years after the events in it had taken place. At face value, his memoirs serve as a lament for the passing of the original owners of the land, the Bangerang clan of the Yorta Yorta language group, and a paean for the successes of the British Empire in Australia. In doing this, Curr's book obfuscated his own role in the original dispossession, but Furphy also succeeds in linking the publication of the book to Curr's contemporary attempts at continued dispossession and de-legitimation of Aboriginal communities as a colonial official. The romantic 1883 memoir sits oddly next to Curr's position on the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (BPA) during the 1870s and 1880s, a tenure that was marked by his 'stubborn commitment to a repressively paternalistic policy of protection' (169).

Edward M. Curr and the Tide of History is an important book in a number of ways. As a chronological biography of Curr, it improves knowledge about him and brings it all together in one easily accessible volume. It continues the study of British Imperial genres of writing, particularly the genre of memoir or recollection. Curr was, and remains, an entertaining and highly readable author. His account of squatting in the 1840s

continues to be a popular choice of primary source for historians of the Port Phillip District, as it should. A critical study of how Curr came to write this book in the 1880s, however, was needed. In addition to its justification of dispossession, Furphy shows how the book was an attempt by Curr to relive his family's glory days when he was a landed gentleman, before drought and other disasters had reduced him to taking up public office. As such, this biography also adds to our understanding of colonial Victorian politics. Our windows into this world are Curr's role as Chief Inspector of Stock and his positions on the BPA.

As Chief Inspector of Stock, Curr is mainly remembered for his success in stamping out scab, a disease that afflicted the colony's flocks, and which had afflicted his own sheep in his pastoral days. His role on the BPA is less fondly remembered. It was marked by his determination to close down the flourishing Coranderrk mission station to which many Kulin people had relocated. Curr wanted to move them to a new station on the Murray River, a proposition that was met with opposition from the Kulin and from some members of the BPA and government. Coranderrk was on the traditional country of the Kulin, as the charismatic Wurundjeri headman William Barak emphasised in 1876: 'the Yarra...is my father's country. There's no mountains for me on the Murray' (136). It seems Curr was surprised that the residents had any say in the matter at all. Asked whether he thought the mission residents should be removed against their will, Curr responded, 'the black should, when necessary, be coerced just as we coerce children and lunatics who cannot take care of

themselves. If they are not coerced, they cannot be preserved from extinction'(136).

At the same time that Curr was endeavouring to shut down Coranderrk, he was writing his four-volume ethnological work *The Australian Race* (1886–87). Along with the *Recollections*, this work helped cement Curr's reputation as a squatter who had an unusual interest in, and sympathy for, Australian Aboriginal people. In chapters nine and ten, Furphy provides a useful overview of the state of nineteenth-century British ethnology and anthropology and how Curr's book fitted into the contemporary debates about the customs and origins of Aboriginal people. Unlike the 'ironic, playful or irreverent' *Recollections*, Curr's *Australian Race* was a scholarly work that aimed for a level of authority on its ethnographic subject (175). Yet as Furphy points out, in the 1998 Yorta Yorta native title decision, all of the passages used by the judge to ascertain and define authentic Bangerang custom came from the *Recollections*.

Scholars such as Patrick Wolfe and Wayne Atkinson (himself one of the Yorta Yorta claimants) have shown how the decision in the Yorta Yorta case repeats, in a structural manner, the original violence of dispossession. Furphy's contribution in this book is to contextualise the man whose memoir had a disproportionate influence on the decision. In presenting the life of Curr and a study of his varied writings, Furphy also provides a concise overview of the Yorta Yorta case and a response to the historical illiteracy and fundamental injustice of the decision. *Edward M. Curr and the Tide of History* is well illustrated, includes several maps,

and is a much-needed biography of an enigmatic colonial official. The book is also freely available for download as an e-book from the publisher's website.

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Nira Wickramasinghe

Metallic Modern: Everyday Machines in Colonial Sri Lanka

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Nira Wickramasinghe's recent account of commodities and modernity in colonial Sri Lanka opens with a yellowing, forgotten letter dating back to late 1912: a serendipitous discovery in Colombo's National Archives that soon spools out into a broader historical inquiry. What does it mean, asks the author, for a Buddhist monk, in the remote village of Welipatanwila in the Crown Colony of Ceylon, to conduct a traditional thanksgiving ceremony in honour of the recently deceased Emperor Meiji of Japan, an imagined 'Asian modern' whose cultural salience transcended the strictures of British colonialism?