Veracini, Lorenzo (2002). Book review: 'Invisible invaders: smallpox and other diseases in Aboriginal Australia 1780-1880', by Judy Campbell


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This study in many ways supersedes Noel Butlin’s (1983) on a similar subject. The role played by ‘Old World’ diseases in Europe’s ascendency is a field of studies that in recent years has witnessed renewed interest. Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) and, partly, Tim Flannery’s *The Future Eaters* (1995) are very successful examples of this trend. Yet, while *Invisible Invaders* sets to challenge the many ‘myths’ that surround smallpox and its role in the disarticulation of Aboriginal Australia (by deploying a model of analysis based on current epidemiological knowledge), the focus is on Australia and a comparative parallel to the North American experience is drawn only passingly.

Campbell’s main interpretative concern is to challenge the notion that smallpox had been introduced (perhaps even voluntarily) by Europeans. She sees it as a valuable contribution to the reconciliation effort: dispelling very uncomfortable notions of European responsibility would diminish the need for a reconciliation process based on the acknowledgement and denunciation of genocidal intention and practice. In a telling remark, Campbell recalls a 1988 Aboriginal protestor that uttered the very concept she intends to dismantle: “you gave us smallpox” (p. 62). This, the debate that surrounded the bicentennial year, is, in fact, the starting point of her analysis. In a list of recent historians that have submitted to the notion of European blame, she includes James Urry, Peter Curson, First Fleet historian Alan Frost, Noel Butlin, and, most tellingly, Henry Reynolds (pp. 55, 61).

*Invisible Invaders* provides a comprehensive analysis of Aboriginal smallpox, appraising at length the first epidemic, the following waves of the disease (in the late 1820s and early 1830s and again in the 1860s and 1870s), and their geographical distribution. The main tenet of Campbell’s argument is that the epidemics of smallpox began with regular visits to the northern coast of the continent by Macassan fleets from Sulawesi and nearby islands. Macassan vessels visited during the monsoon season and local Aboriginals had extensive contact with them, resuming their traditional activities at the end of the season and carrying smallpox with them. According to Campbell’s account, smallpox must have slowly moved across the continent, eventually reaching the southeast, where Europeans first recorded it.

However, in separating European presence and Aboriginal disease *Invisible Invaders* is not entirely convincing. Untying Aboriginal disaster from European activity (because the devastation of Aboriginal society precedes settlement if it is performed by smallpox) is executed with what in the end becomes a mantra almost uncritically repeating official documents and settlers and explorers’ memoirs. Here Campbell’s examination from scientific becomes somewhat naïve: the images conveyed invariably depict Europeans, officials and settlers alike, trying to prevent the course of the smallpox epidemics, vaccinating local Aboriginals people, always providing food and care to the sick, and taking immediate and effective action to quarantine possible sources of the disease. Her outlook could not be further from Butlin’s notion of a ‘deliberate exterminating act’, what the author refers to as the “troubled consciences of the humanitarians” (p. 227). One has the impression that historical accuracy must lay somewhere in between the two approaches, and that denying or mitigating frontier killings on the basis of previous depopulation is not extinguishing the need for reconciliation.

The use of recent epidemiological models is a groundbreaking exercise. Yet, whilst Campbell has produced a scientifically knowledgeable and comprehensively researched work, her use of historical sources is very unsuspecting. I would be sceptical of Professor Fenner’s scientific and confident assertiveness (in the foreword) when stating succinctly that settlers and explorers’ remarks “are reliable” (p. v). One feels the need to question the nature of
Campbell’s sources and to elaborate a rationale that would explain the almost irresistible temptation on behalf of European observers to highlight Aboriginal disease, pustules, ugliness, and deformity. In the end, Campbell’s very ideological stand, combined with a tendency to conflate the narration with its historical sources, spoils a study that does - and compellingly - provide a convincing analysis of the dynamics of Aboriginal epidemics. Even if up to date epidemiological models were applicable, reproducing a very selected and uncritical collection of historical sources flaws Campbell’s analysis.

In the context of the current debate on the Australian frontiers and about the permeability of Australia’s northern borders, Campbell’s thesis is somehow perplexing. While Campbell’s thesis echoes other calls for the dismissal of the ‘new Australian history’, the notion that it was smallpox and not frontier warfare (or other European introduced diseases) that decimated the Aborigines is not new and submits to a vision of Aboriginal dispossession that downscales the role and proactive part of the colonising, much more visible, invaders. *Invisible Invaders* downsizes other causes of Aboriginal depopulation and neglects the wealth of historical sources that during recent decades has accumulated on Aboriginal resistance. In the end, while contributing meaningfully to the study of Old World diseases and Aboriginals, *Invisible Invaders* fails in its ultimate attempt to excuse European responsibility.