Julia Clancy-Smith’s *Mediterraneans* looks at a neglected period with contemporary resonance, writes Lorenzo Veracini.


**Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800–1900**

By Julia A. Clancy-Smith | University of California Press | US$49.95

ITALIAN entrepreneur Giovanna Tellini was tried in a Tunis consular court in 1868. Ostensibly, she was operating a legitimate coffee shop, also used as a dwelling, in a business partnership with “Annetta,” a Spanish citizen, and a certain Dimitri L’Inglisi (Dimitri the Englishman). The shop, rented from a Greek named Papadopolo, was just a front: in reality it doubled as a base for a number of illegal activities and for storing stolen goods. Contraband items were also found: tobacco, coffee, white and brown sugar, gunpowder. Other objects seized and inventoried included a recently fired pistol, silver and gold coinage from various Mediterranean locations, and, most compromisingly, instruments for breaking and entering. The trial proceedings also uncovered illicit amorous encounters and unsanctioned de facto relationships.

The trial of Giovanna Tellini is one revealing example of how the local and transnational worlds intersected in North Africa in the early to mid nineteenth century, a period that Julia Clancy-Smith examines in this timely book. While our contemporary predicament is characterised by migratory flows of people moving towards the “global North” in search of better opportunities, and by corresponding fears about the presence of “foreigners in our midst,” Clancy-Smith focuses on migratory displacements that went the other way, and on responses that were much more nuanced than today’s pattern of generalised rejection. As such, her work can be seen as an invitation to think outside the square.

A remarkable body of scholarly reflection has focused on what came *after* colonialism, and on the population shifts that accompanied and followed the formal end of the European colonial empires. North Africa and the Mediterranean basin, the areas Clancy-Smith writes about, have been no exception. *Mediterraneans*, however, focuses on what came *before* — on the population shifts that occurred in the decades prior to the creation of a formal colonial relationship. (Using language that indicates her disciplinary background, Clancy-Smith refers to “peoplings” and to “borderlands.”) Tunisia faces a crucial strategic corridor for trans-Mediterranean transfers: if one wants to detect the movement of people across the sea, Tunis would certainly be a privileged point of observation. And it is, and was, except that in the nineteenth century people moved south.

At one point, people from the islands had begun moving south. Sicilians, Sardinians, Corsicans, and people from the Balearic Islands, Malta and other places started seeking opportunities across the water: “sometime around 1820,” Clancy-Smith notes, “things began to change, slowly at first, then with greater velocity as people abandoned the islands and the Mediterranean’s northern edges to settle in majority Muslim lands.” It was a most remarkable development; consider that until this new migratory pattern took hold people from the same locales had left Europe for North Africa only if they had been enslaved by North African pirates.
No longer slaves, the Europeans from the northern shores of the Mediterranean sea who were living in North Africa were not settlers either. They were not part of the global “settler revolution” that James Belich has described in his successful recent book, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939*. They rarely travelled with their families, although their families could join them later, and they were certainly not travelling with the distinct understanding of their entitlement that characterised other settlers and their migrations to foreign lands. Settlers usually moved on the back of colonial expansion, or in the expectation that it would follow them wherever they went; in contrast, these Mediterraneans accommodated themselves within a non-colonial regime. Their preparedness to deal with an alien sovereign would be most incomprehensible in later decades, and remains so. Focusing on a now disappeared world where relationships were not fundamentally or necessarily informed by colonialism and its consequences, *Mediterraneans* is indeed an invitation to think beyond it.

But it is not only about sovereignty. If settlers and other colonists are typically willing and able to draw, reinforce and patrol the boundaries between indigenous and exogenous, and between European and Native, the individuals who populate Clancy-Smith’s book were “cultural creoles,” “Crypto-Europeans,” “Euro-Tunisians,” all expressions that she uses in different parts of her book. They were brokers, social intermediaries, border-crossers, even people who transgressed “religiosexual boundaries.” They were workers and entrepreneurs, successful and failed small business owners, smugglers and protégés, all forming and contributing to contingent “communities forged by successive dislocations, settlement, and assimilation to varying degrees.” They were, in Clancy-Smith’s summation, “poor whites, hybrids, and cultural hyphens,” people who “violated, complicated, or pushed at the boundaries – legal, political, sexual, moral – of colonial or protocolonial rule.” She repeatedly emphasises an irreducible heterogeneity. The Italian community of Tunisia, for example, an important topic of this book, comprised “congeries of anarchists, masons, socialists, Garibaldians [sic], bourgeois secular Jewish traders, and pious Catholic noblemen.” It could hardly be defined as a community; indeed, it could hardly be understood as “Italian” at all – “proto-Italian” would perhaps be a better characterisation. (In this respect, if *Mediterraneans* is a reflection on what comes before colonialism, it is also a reflection on what comes before nationalism – and an equally inviting suggestion to think beyond it.)

These north–south displacements have been neglected until very recently, even if they constituted the “largest trans-sea dispersal of peoples since the Iberian expulsion.” This neglect is understandable: they don’t compare numerically to the contemporary human flows crossing the Atlantic – tens of thousands is not millions – or to the successive displacement of “nearly 1.75 million people” who abandoned the Maghrib after the second world war. Moreover, the hang-ups associated with the difficult memory of the French colonial past, on the one hand, and postcolonial national historiographers who had no interest in focusing on those who had left, on the other, contributed until very recently to a systematic pattern of scholarly neglect. And yet, these population shifts are important – important because smaller, earlier, short-distance and temporary displacements were ultimately prequels to larger, later, long-distance and permanent ones. Sicilians eventually went everywhere and Maltese ended up constituting relatively large and cohesive communities in many countries, including Australia, as Clancy-Smith notes. Would these later displacements have been thinkable without this tradition of moving across the sea?

These displacements are also important because they created a world we may even look to for inspiration. Focusing on what happens when indigenous forces retain enough power to force newcomers to accommodate to local social and cultural practices, *Mediterraneans* ultimately identifies what could be described as a “middle ground.” Like the one described by Richard White in *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, this middle ground was also eventually engulfed by colonialism. Indeed, *Mediterraneans* could be seen as performing for the study of a particular macro-region during times of intensifying intra-community contacts what that book did for another. In an age of increasing tensions, it is perhaps wise to consider as many middle grounds one can think of. •