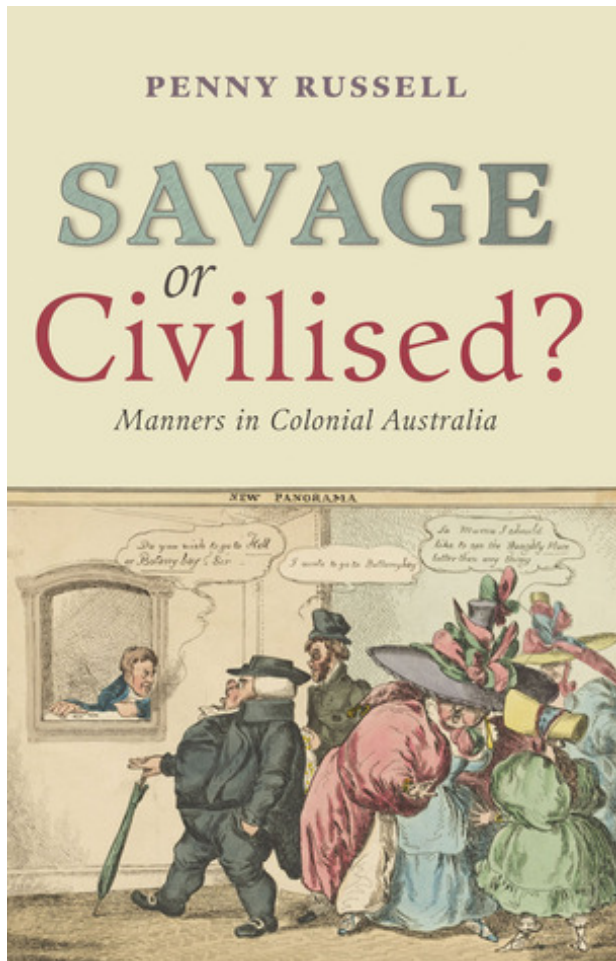


Penny Russell, *Savage or Civilised? Manners in Colonial Australia*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010. 406 + x pp. ISBN 9780868408606. AUD 34.95. **Reviewed by Danielle Norberg, Eberhard Karls University Tübingen.**



“In manners the colonial self was made, in all of its cultural uncertainty” (16); this statement is at the heart of a work which was already published in 2010 but leaves a lasting impression on the student of Australian history and culture. The introduction clarifies poignantly why manners were of particular significance in the colony: The question *Savage or Civilised?* posed on the cover is presented as a definitive one for nineteenth-century Australia. The author places manners squarely within the civilising project of colonisation and

highlights how these ideas overshadowed relations between European settlers and Aboriginal people, but also between different groups within white society. “This book tells the history of Australian settlers for whom manners *did* matter” (1), especially the middle class and the elite who had the greatest stake in setting themselves apart by their measure of civility. The book is not about codified rules of etiquette; no such overview could elucidate the difficulty of behaving correctly in complex social situations in which there was no script to follow. Here manners are also understood in a broader sense as a form of conduct that shows consideration and respect to others. From the many contexts in which manners mattered the author presents four: “the pastoral frontiers, the uncertain elites of

convicts society, the domestic world, and the new public spaces of the modern city" (12). The book is divided into four parts; each of these contains three or four chapters that illustrate a different aspect. Many of the chapters are structured around the biographies of single people such as squatters, politicians, wives, doctors, or military men. Jane Franklin, wife of a Tasmanian governor, or the politician Henry Parkes are well-known. The stories of others, such as the Melbourne prostitute Annie Britton, are less famous but just as engaging. Although removed by more than a century, these examples highlight the intricacy of the successful enactment of manners in everyday life and the far-reaching consequences of a failed navigation of the social pitfalls.

The stories are "not typical of colonial experience [...] but may help to understand it better" (14). The result is a lively foray through Australia's colonial past. The sections seem to follow a rough chronological order, covering the time period from the founding of the Australian colony to Federation. However, too much information about other periods is given throughout to substantiate this first impression. In addition, the aforementioned contexts existed side by side at varying levels of significance.

Part I deals with encounters between colonists and Aboriginal people on the frontiers. The first chapter is an overview of the treatment of Aboriginal people as 'savage' from the time the 'civilised' British set foot on land till the end of the century. What is outlined in the introduction – civilisation as the justification for the dispossession of the Indigenous people of Australia – is investigated further. A detailed account of the significance of handshakes illustrates how manners shaped encounters between Aboriginal people and colonists. Aboriginal dress codes and body ornamentation as well as their food are also described; these were essential areas in which practices differed so greatly as to repel most colonists. This lays the groundwork for the stories of the land-agent Robert Dawson who attempted a "polite dispossession" (13) of Aboriginal people, and Niel Black, a Scottish squatter who aspired to the standards of a gentleman. The "manners of dispossession" (55) allowed both men –

albeit with very different strategies – to dissipate their guilt and maintain their self-perception as moral and civilised while asserting their superiority and power in the occupation of Aboriginal lands. However, manners as a mark of respect are also proposed as undermining and questioning this justification.

In Part II the focus shifts from the bush, where civilisation stood in danger of disintegrating into savagery, to the towns, where the danger lay in the chaotic confluence of social groups from sometimes nefarious backgrounds. In such a fluid society the understandings of what constituted civilised conduct were varied and standards unstable. This is contrasted with the structuring function of civility to differentiate between the different strata of society. The role of governors and their wives as social arbiters of respectability and status among the elite were fodder for the press. A woman's honour and purity also could be questioned in the papers; a man might have submitted himself to the scrutiny of the public rather than settle challenges to his honour in a duel: Jane Franklin, wife of the governor of Tasmania, was vilified in the press for stepping outside of her proper sphere as a woman by carrying her civilising endeavours too far, they ended up being construed as political. And the public showed their disapproval by their rude behaviour towards her; in one extreme instance she was sent a dead snake by mail. Doctor Farquhar McCrae aimed to defend his reputation but transgressed unwritten professional boundaries by the way he did public battle, also in print, with a colleague.

Part III begins with living conditions at the diggings in the gold-fields – an extreme example of the threat to the ideals of domesticity and propriety felt everywhere and ultimately perceived as a menace to civility. In marriages, manners indicated social status but also regulated behaviour between spouses. The gendered ideal of women as responsible for domestic harmony and raising well-mannered children is scrutinised here. This section follows the stories of three women who tried to live up to the exacting standards of their respective environments: Margaret Youngman was an impoverished governess who eked out a miserable existence by trying to instil

manners in the unruly children of a squatter. Polly Hardy had little power as a woman to inspire the necessary consideration due to herself and her children in an absentee husband. Isabella Ramsay was left with the sole care of her three children and a household under reduced circumstances; she was hard-put to maintain respectability and keep her children in check during the year her husband was abroad.

Part IV begins with the proper conduct of strangers during fleeting encounters in public spaces such as the street, the park, the theatre and opera, and the trams or railway – more specifically, how the close proximity of all classes heightened the importance of the proper sending and reading of signals. Questions of who to greet in the street, or of dress and comportment could give rise to misunderstandings. The other chapters of the section describe more complex and prolonged interactions that occurred in public: A scandal was ignited when the prostitute Annie Britton paraded the streets wearing the sword and cap of the volunteer officer Henry Gillbee on a bet; his public downfall would likely have been less deep if he had behaved more honourably towards his companion in the aftermath. Colonial Secretary Henry Parkes became an object of public derision and pity when he offered a handshake to a member of the Royal family in greeting and was refused (although who of the two really displayed worse manners is also discussed). Parkes became premier five times running but the disadvantages of his common background only gave him a tentative acceptance in the circles he moved in.

The conclusion reflects on manners denigrated as colonial that then became part of what formed an Australian national identity. However, based on her study, the author assesses celebrated national characteristics as mostly myth. She alludes to the current dangers of an “easy familiarity” (361) with national ideals such as egalitarianism, which privileged white men and was born from the asymmetric power relations in colonial Australia that are still visible today. Here Aboriginal Australians, whose existence was often ignored, and women’s inequality are specifically referred to. The

author includes a brief personal appeal at the end for Australians to come to terms with all of Australia's cultural history – however unpopular or contrary to a national identity it may seem – arguing that the social and cultural legacies of colonial times have descended to “us” (362) today and need to be dealt with.

As Russell is well aware of, the book has one limitation that was probably difficult to avoid: The way the different sections are ordered appears to mirror the effect of the increasing marginalisation of Aboriginal Australians; in Part I they are given a primary position and more space is dedicated to this than to any of the other contexts, but in the three latter parts revolving around urban environments they almost disappear from view. However, Russell emphasises that she doesn't give a full or chronological account, and she also writes about later developments in this first section. In addition, focusing on such encounters that stand for many of the interactions in the centuries to follow is a logical choice. In the conclusion, this limitation is redeemed to some extent since Russell is very outspoken about the “most institutionalised” and “most brutal” (360) forms of ‘civilisation’ that Indigenous Australians were subjected to right into the twentieth century.

Overall, the mode of presentation is well-chosen: The almost anecdotal, detailed accounts make the biographies live and breathe. Russell is careful to present varied, even contradictory facets of the persons portrayed and so fleshes out the issues they represent. By connecting these with big themes in cultural studies – such as race, gender, status, and power – the colonial past is framed in terms that inform current discussions about Australian society. The knowledge revealed in the careful commentary or in the dense summaries of the origins of certain concepts might conceivably be overlooked by the uninitiated reader because of the author's fluent style. Currently, no other comparable work on manners in colonial Australia is available. The author does not revolutionise the common perspective on Australian colonial society, but certainly enlarges the view to a more contradictory, multi-faceted history. Working from the question of manners, the book shows that it is in everyday human

interactions that history is made. Thus, some of the underlying cultural values that drove social dynamics in colonial Australia can be understood better. In summary, the book is a rewarding read for both the novice and the scholar.