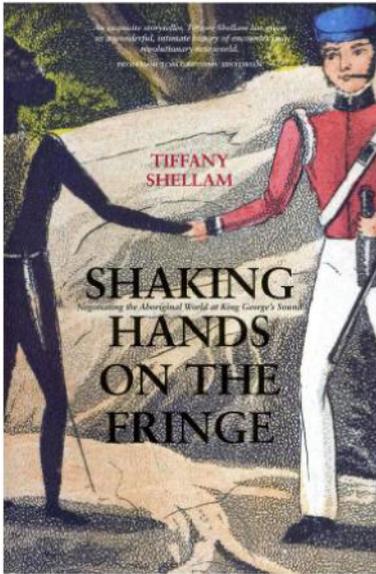


Tiffany Shellam. *Shaking Hands on the Fringe. Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound.*

Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2009, pp. xii + 267, AUD 29.95 paper. ISBN 9781921401268. **Reviewed by Oliver Haag, Vienna.**



This is an unconventional book. Emerging from a doctoral dissertation in history, it takes on a highly literary form, closely aligning itself to story-telling, while nonetheless being factually grounded. It deals with a geographically and periodically highly limited scope—the present-day Albany region of Western Australia, covering the early 1820s and 1830s—but nevertheless produces insights that are relevant to a new understanding of Aboriginal-British relations in the early

colonial era. And it departs from any simplistic narrative that places Aborigines as the passive victims of British colonial endeavour. Far from it, Aboriginal people are portrayed as highly flexible subjects in a rapidly changing world of inter-cultural contact.

The study begins with the first contacts in 1821 between the British navigators and the Aboriginal people of the King George's Sound in the south-west of Western Australia. These contacts were already characterised by the strategy of befriending, which on both sides served as a means of enforcing and expanding the different interests in question. Aborigines benefited from British presents and the British benefited from local Aboriginal knowledge. This reciprocal benefit also prevailed in the first years of the British garrison which was erected in the area of today's Albany in 1826. In meticulously elaborated detail, the author identifies different spheres of interaction between King Ya-nup, the Aboriginal group of the area, and the British.

The British arrival certainly caused an indelible impact on the region. But whereas the British intruded into King Ya-nup Country, Ya-nup managed to retain an autonomous cultural and legal Aboriginal world outside the British one, so the author argues. They continued the practice of spearing—a complex form of retaliation on which the British had marginal influence; they were free to wear their traditional clothing and to perform their ancestral traditions. The British presence, at least initially, was thus rather of mutual benefit than exploitative: “The garrison at King George’s Sound was a British possession without an Aboriginal dispossession” (68).

The King Ya-nup, Shellam expounds, used the British garrison for both economic and political purposes. It was considered a place of retreat from assaults by the Wills people, the rivalling Aboriginal group of the area; it offered new and exotic nourishment; and its ships enabled travelling and diplomatic missions to other regions, especially the Swan River Colony. The King Ya-nup, this study suggests, harnessed the British presence, rendering the relationship between the British and the King Ya-nup respectful. Orders were issued, for example, that the names of recently deceased Aboriginal people had not to be mentioned by any of the newcomers (118). Such an expression of respect seemed to have been unique in comparison to later inter-racial encounters.

With the transmission of contagious diseases, this constructive relationship, however, transformed into a destructive one. Ironically, it was the friendly relationship—the exchanges of blankets, garment and food—that, in the end, wrought havoc on the King Ya-nup. Nonetheless, as the author underlines, the history of first contact in this particular region needs to be understood as a one of mutual respect and benefit rather than destruction and violence: “I believe there is an ethical importance in celebrating moments of friendship, reciprocity and respectful interaction in Aboriginal relations with non-indigenous people” (216).

This endeavour to present a more balanced account of inter-racial Australian history in the early colonial period is part of a larger trend in Australian historiography to shift focus away from destruction of

Aboriginal societies towards the highlighting of Aboriginal agency. Henry Reynold's *With the White People* (1990) and Ann McGrath's *Born in the Cattle* (1987) are, arguably, important landmark studies in this respect. But this project of reinscribing political agency also runs the risk of rendering invisible the violent aspects of inter-racial contact. *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* indeed seems to suggest that contact in this particular region was entirely humane and respectful, whereas the destructive moments of contact are relegated to an act of nature beyond of any human control (disease transmission).

Yet the transmission of diseases might not have been that unforeseeable—given the prior knowledge of the devastating effects of disease transmission to the Indigenous populaces in the Americas, centuries before. In similar fashion, for all the political agency the author rightfully ascribes to the King Ya-nup, the power relationships between the British and the King Ya-nup were still asymmetrical. A thorough contextualisation of this history with current history debates in Australia might have been worthwhile to fully understand the author's endeavour to "celebrate the moments of friendship"—especially the focus on destruction that ensued from W.E.H. Stanner's famous denunciation of the "Great Australian Silence" but also the History Wars and the denial of inter-racial violence.

The story-telling technique that distinguishes the book would have also required more rigorous methodological examination. For example, the expression, "This large schooner, the Bathurst, like a swan and its cygnets, carried three smaller open boats" (4), is certainly beautifully written but historically problematic, for it is unclear who expressed this allegory. Is it the King Ya-nup or the British who conceived the arrival of the ship in such a way or is it the author who simply uses a fictional device in presenting her story?

The following sentence is similarly ambiguous: "This story starts in late January 1830. The season of Metelok had begun and plentiful schools of salmon were seen swimming around the warm waters of King George's Sound" (103). The reference to the salmons does not

reoccur in the story and is, probably, part of a creative narrative technique. The adoption of fictional devices in academic history itself is certainly a very intriguing processes but it would have required methodological explanation and readers should not have been left guessing which parts of the story are fictional and which are not. Moreover, this technique suggests strongly that the author adopted an Indigenous mode of story-telling. Being a fresh and principally welcome approach, the adoption of such an approach would have nevertheless benefited from methodological and theoretical discussion.

Moreover, a detailed exploration of the reasons for the mutually beneficent relationship between the King Ya-nup and the British might have been worthwhile. Was this primarily because of the political strategies evinced by particular garrison commandants, because the British were dependent on the King Ya-nup, because of Aboriginal strategies or because of the relative lack of British power in this particular region?

Apart from this criticism *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* is a superb study. It filters skillfully the information contained in the British sources from which the author infers to the motivations and agency of Aboriginal protagonists at the time. It produces fresh knowledge and it presents academic history in compellingly creative manner. Seen from both its narrative technique and its new insights, this book is a recommendable read not merely to those interested in early colonial Australian history. But it also offers valuable incentives to all those engaged in the theory and methodology of practicing history.