

Moving Trees and Trading Melons: Reconstructing Local Knowledge and Settler Practices in 1840s South Australia

Eva Bischoff

“The natives seem to live on water melons,” Margaret May, a young South Australian settler reported back home in February 1844. “[E]veryone,” she continued, “was eating them, and they can eat all day long.” Melons changed hands for performing small tasks or as gifts. But Aborigines were not alone in appreciating them. The family exported melons to other Australasian settler colonies, i.e. Van Diemen’s Land, whose climate was unsuitable “to ripen them in abundance.”

Creating a new socio-ecological system was central to the process of settler imperial expansion, as Norbert Finzsch and others have demonstrated. My presentation will enrich this picture by taking a closer look at the family of Joseph and Hannah May through the lens of the private letters of their daughter Margaret. I will examine her detailed account of the family’s everyday life along three key questions: What kind of local knowledge did the Mays acquire from fellow settlers and/or from their interaction with Aboriginal people? What insights did Aboriginal people gain from their encounters with members of the family? What strategies or practices evolved from these exchanges on the part of the Europeans and which on the part of the Aborigines? In answering these questions, I will demonstrate that (South Australian) settler imperial expansion relied on a set of multilayered and multidirectional processes of translation in which fruits and trees, knowledge and practices circulated not only on an imperial but also on a local and regional scale.

Bio

Eva Bischoff teaches International History at the University of Trier. Her research interests include colonial and imperial history, postcolonial theory, and gender/queer studies. She currently conducts a book project investigating the history of a group of Quaker families and their roles in the process of settler imperialism in early nineteenth-century Australia. She recently edited a special issue on “Experiences, Actors, Spaces: Dimensions of Settler Colonialism in Transnational Perspective. Settler Colonial Studies” in *Settler Colonial Studies Journal* (online since December 2015, print 2016) to which she contributed an article presenting first results of her on-going research project.

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