ISSN 2754-5547

https://doi.org/10.52230/LPMJ3817

‘Catharine Coleborne, Vagrant Lives in Colonial Australasia: Regulating Mobility, 1840-1910’

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To cite this book review: Richard Scully, ‘Ian F. Grant, Pressing On: A History of New Zealand’s Newspapers, 1921-2000’, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 5 (September 2025): 145-147, https://doi.org/10.52230/BAHT6941

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Catharine Coleborne, *Vagrant Lives in Colonial Australasia: Regulating Mobility, 1840-1910* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 201pp. Hardback. £85. ISBN: 978-1-3502-5269-1.

Catharine Coleborne's excellent new book *Vagrant Lives in Colonial Australasia: Regulating Mobility, 1840-1910* will appeal to a wide readership; her writing segues between academic theory and personal narratives seamlessly. Coleborne's forensic research offers us a socio-legal history of vagrancy, a task she acknowledges as an enormous undertaking and one shaped by the available evidence (p. 2). She achieves this through shedding light on the lived experiences of settler colonial 'vagrancy' within the analytical framework of imperial 'mobility' (p. 3). The sources she employs go a long way to show how vagrancy was constructed in a colonial settler world. Mobility, Coleborne posits, was regulated in three ways; through legal apparatus (the law), modes of surveillance (police and courts), and from the writings of those who commented on the state of colonial societies and its outsiders (p. 127). Indeed, historians of the Australasian white settler colonies benefit from the amount of material (much of it digitised) which allows for this policy versus practice analysis. *Police Gazettes*, court records, and newspaper accounts help build a picture of how the role and definition of the 'vagrant' evolved to regulate movement of those deemed undesirable.

Vagrant Lives in Colonial Australasia takes us through these themes in the south-eastern colonies of Australia: New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania; and New Zealand. Here we are given access to what happened to the 'mobile people who were part of an imperial world that was itself highly mobile' (p. 17). This was a world, as Coleborne points out, 'formed by mobile settler populations whose very ability to move about freely was based on curtailing the movement of Indigenous people, as well as those whose movement presented a threat' (p. 123). Organised into seven chapters (including the introduction and an epilogue) this book focusses on the experiences of those who lived (through choice or by circumstances) as vagrants in these settler-colonial regions.

This micro-history approach speaks to the 'mobility turn' in academic research, by which Coleborne means reading the historical (or as she says, the legal) archive to examine 'the way people moved around, why they moved [and] how their movement was constrained or restricted…' (p. 5). Studying vagrancy, Coleborne points out, 'brings out the connections between law, policing, social formation and cultures of mobility' (p. 5). Her work reminds us that some vagrants moved between social institutions 'sometimes in the never-ending cycles of reliance on welfare of different types' (p. 9). Although admitting that first-hand accounts of those who lived as mobile or vagrant people are rare (p. 14) her vignettes of people such as Mary Ann Ward, Christina Lawson, Sarah Jones, and James Cox are insightful, as are the snapshots of other less documented cases.

One of the appeals of the book is how it builds a picture of policies and procedures towards vagrancy across the maturing white settler colonies. Chapter 2 situates the legal framework, one based on British law, as exacerbated by the 'convict stain'. Even in the non-penal settlements, fears grew towards the wandering criminal classes and perceptions of their disorderly conduct. The undesirably mobile were labelled invariably as idle and disorderly, rogues, vagabonds, and habitual drunkards (p. 27). Such traits were associated with pauperism, or its legal parlance, having 'no visible

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means of support' (p. 31). This phrase is akin to the 'likely to become a public charge' exclusion within the burgeoning migration controls in the same regions. Coleborne deals with 'undesirables' already within these 'utopian new societies' where destitution was horrifying to colonial authorities (p. 31), yet the correlation with the fears about Britain 'shovelling out her paupers' is clear throughout. She recognises the paradoxes therein; 'mobility' itself presented challenges to imperial and colonial authorities, while at the same time it was pivotal to colonial settlement and formation' (p. 39). These were white societies 'founded on the grand project of immigration and settlement' (p. 94) in which 'immigration restriction was another outcome of the hyper-vigilant attitude towards mobility in the nineteenth century' (p. 128).

Surveillance of the vagrant types fell mainly to the colonial police forces, a theme examined in Chapter 3. Coleborne uses the associated police and court records to consider the 'worlds and experiences of vagrants as they encountered the law and police' (p. 45). Here she uses the *Police Gazettes* to great effect and traces the professionalisation of the colonial police force(s) in which they became more clinical in their approach to identifying transgressions (p. 50). As theories about crime, criminality, and 'acquired characteristics' evolved, so too did the reference to distinguishing marks, characteristics, mental capacity, and physical defects in the attempts to apprehend vagrants (pp. 54-55). Conversely this level of police surveillance led to a form of 'ad hoc welfarism' (p. 81). Some vagrants found themselves referred for welfare support, which although for some meant a term of imprisonment, at least provided food and shelter (p. 57).

The paternalistic approach of some colonial figures is also apparent in Chapter 4 which considers vagrancy as a 'way of life' for those in the precarious position of having to find shelter and cope with illness and disability (p. 71). Asylum records show how officials labelled the unwell and destitute as vagrants to render them institutionalised, a fate also experienced by the 'harmless and incurable' elderly (p. 81). Institutional care was perhaps a humane response but also existed as a professional precautionary measure; welfare professionals who failed to prevent deaths of vagrants were often criticised (p. 82).

Chapter 5 'Worlds of vulnerability' examines how the 'modern vagrant' trope emerged from social or economic concerns, especially in the 1890s economic depression which reinforced the need for a new concept of 'vulnerable persons. (p. 96). The intersectional (in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, and disability) 'underclass' who failed to succeed in an increasingly ordered settler society became the equivalent of old-world paupers. Coleborne identifies further colonial ambiguities here; while more people were identified as problem vagrants, their mobility – as a method of survival – rendered them invisible (pp. 96-97). Likewise, where transient mobile workers gathered to protest lack of labour opportunities in a fluctuating economy they were demonised (p. 109). The late nineteenth century was an era of protectionism. It was therefore unsurprising to find New Zealand's William Pember Reeves describing urban vagrants as lazy, useless, and outcasts with a penchant for herding together (p. 114). Reeves, as the Liberal Government's Minister of Labour, was similarly disparaging of 'undesirable immigrants' whom in 1894 he attempted to define as:

> Any contract worker, imbecile, idiot, insane person, cripple, pauper, habitual drunkard, every person likely from any cause to become a charge on the public funds, or suffering from

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> tuberculosis or leprosy, or who has been adjudged guilty in any country of any offence involving imprisonment of less than 12 months.[1]

While such 'officialdom' drove policies towards the 'undesirable', Coleborne also draws usefully on travel or adventure narratives. These are used in Chapter 6 to show how 'tramps' and 'swagmen' (transient labourers) became part of the romanticisation of vagrants. Readers enjoyed these 'imagined vicarious colonial journals' which depicted popular colonial characters (pp. 119-120). This brought to mind the so-called ne'er-do wells, who similarly led transient lives, albeit as on-off financially solvent travellers until they ran out of money and their behaviour singled them out as problematic.[2] I wondered too if the so-called Pākehā-Māori fell foul of the vagrancy laws which targeted Europeans who associated with Indigenous peoples (p. 33). These were men who settled in (often marrying into) Māori communities especially in the early colonial period, so presumably before the rise of vagrancy laws. Or by the very fact they settled in one place, were they not part of those whose 'very movement presented a threat' (p. 123)?.

Coleborne does remind us that she has only been able to tell the stories of a few of the many thousands of vagrant lives found in the record. Importantly she concludes that while some appeared to want to live as 'wanderers', others were forced into mobility through poverty and lack of social connections. Regardless, vagrants became vilified for their propensity for crime and reliance on alcohol (p. 118). Ultimately their mobility was, by its very nature, a threat to the want to create ordered, respectable societies (p. 123).

The modern-day resonance of these themes is acknowledged in the epilogue. Coleborne thoughtfully reflects on her Australian environs where homelessness is a significant social problem. Her empathy is also apparent when dealing with her historical actors. In considering how families were dealt with by colonial authorities she tells of the case of James and Margaret McDonald. The McDonalds were charged with being idle and disorderly after found sleeping outdoors with their two young children. They were not a criminal family, Coleborne argues, but were 'doing the best for their family…they had not abandoned their children [but] were following the promise of work' (p. 102). Such a description should remind readers about what Coleborne calls 'the precarious present'. The 'hostile designs' of anti-homeless architecture (p. 129) she refers to also exists in the United Kingdom, while the United States of America fear that people are 'only one pay check away from being homeless' is becoming more prevalent. Thus, while on a scholarly level Coleborne should be commended for examining vagrancy within a wider socio-legal framework, her book is deserving of an audience beyond academia.

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[1] See Jennifer S. Kain, "Imbecile Passengers and Commercial Paradoxes, New Zealand 1880 –1898," in *Insanity and Immigration Control in New Zealand and Australia, 1860–1930*. Mental Health in Historical Perspective (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); John Stenhouse, 'Undesirable Bill's Undesirables Bill: William Pember Reeves and Eugenics in Late-Victorian New Zealand' in *Eugenics at the Edges of Empire*, eds D. Paul, J. Stenhouse, and H. Spencer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[2] See Jennifer Kain, "The Ne'er-do-well: Representing the Dysfunctional Migrant Mind, New Zealand 1850–1910," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 48, no. 1 (2015): 75-92.

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