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‘Rohan Howitt, Southern Frontier: Australia, Antarctica and Empire in the Southern Ocean World 1815-1947’

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Rohan Howitt, *The Southern Frontier: Australia, Antarctica and Empire in the Southern Ocean World* (Melbourne University Press, 2025), 296pp. Paperback. A\$39.99. ISBN: 978-0-5228-8051-9.

The role of northern empires in the history of Antarctic exploration and exploitation has long been a subject of scholarly interest. In *The Southern Frontier*, environmental historian Rohan Howitt brings an intriguing new perspective to this Antarctic-centred historiography, shedding light on how Australian people, governments, corporations, and institutions thought about the polar continent, islands and ocean to their south, and how Australia came to regard this Southern Ocean world as an extension of its own territorial space. The chapters are structured around a series of key moments between the 1830s and 1930s, from Australia's engagement with three Antarctic expeditions in 1839 and 1841, to the BANZARE (British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expeditions) in 1929-31 under the leadership of Sir Douglas Mawson. This campaign, motivated by the desire to consolidate Australia's claim to Antarctic territory and secure its perceived economic and scientific benefits, provided the basis for the legal annexation of the Australian Antarctic Territory in 1933.

Drawing on a close reading of archival and newspaper sources between the 1840s and 1890s – a period usually dismissed as uneventful in Antarctic affairs – Howitt skilfully distils the little-known origins and dissemination of ideas and debates about the southern polar region's strategic and economic importance to Australia, from nationalism and navigational safety to the prospect of an El Dorado down south. He then traces the trajectory of these ideas in the decades after Federation in 1901, examining how they contributed to the unfolding of a distinctively Australian Antarctic consciousness and expansionist mentality. In the process, he reframes familiar stories of early 20th century Antarctic expeditions, showing how Australia's enthusiastic support for polar exploration and concern for the fate of stricken explorers, including Robert Falcon Scott's death in 1912, the plight of Ernest Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic Expedition in 1916, and the whereabouts of the American aviator Lincoln Ellsworth in 1935, reflected a growing conviction that Australia had special rights and responsibilities in relation to its southern frontier.

This book is an important contribution to the study of Antarctic history, its intersections with Australia's national history, and the global history of empire more broadly. By enlarging the image of Australia from a colonial outpost of the British Empire to one where Australia sought to extend its own sovereignty beyond its continental limits, Howitt reframes the south polar region as a southern frontier in which Australia's geographical proximity bestowed a 'natural right' to exert control over it. This, he argues, was part of a wider vision whereby Australia's 'natural sphere of influence' extended north to Christmas Island, New Guinea, and Nauru, east into the Pacific Ocean, west into the Indian Ocean and south towards Antarctica. This reorientation of Australia's cartography offers a radically different way of viewing Australia's national history. Rather than an inward-focused island continent, Australia becomes the centre of a vast archipelago stretching all the way from the equator to the Pole, reconstructing a 'lost way of thinking' (p. 7) about the Southern Ocean world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The idea that Antarctica was a natural extension of Australia also gained traction at a time when other smaller states such as Argentina, Chile, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Norway were seeking to claim new territories with potential economic or strategic value. Australia's conception of a Southern Ocean world, then, can be

seen as one example of 'small-state imperialism' (p. 9), a theme that offers fertile ground for reinterpreting both the national histories of smaller nations and conventional notions of 'empire' in global history. As Howitt concludes: 'Australia was an empire in a world of empires, and the imperialism of small states was, in its own way, as significant as the imperialism of the old powers' (p. 220).

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