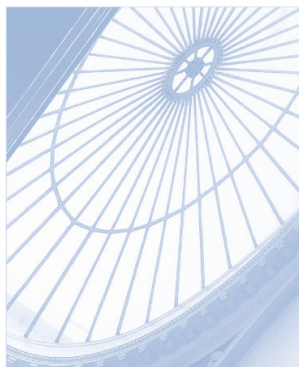


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SEBASTIAN KOCH, *Identitätskrisen nach dem Ende des Britischen Empire: Zur kulturellen Neu-Verortung in Kanada, Australien und Aotearoa Neuseeland*, *Bedrohte Ordnungen*, 18 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), xiii + 509 pp. ISBN 978 3 161 61481 1 (open access e-book); ISBN 978 3 161 61480 4 (hardback), €89.00

‘The whole point of writing a history about a country is so that we can liberate ourselves from the dead hand of the past. The whole point of knowing about the past of humanity in Australia is to prevent all of us, the Aborigines, the British, the Europeans, and the Asians, from being doomed to go on repeating the past.’¹ This quote from a lecture given by the eminent Australian historian Manning Clark in July 1987 could well have been part of the published version of the PhD thesis by Sebastian Koch on crises of identity in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand after the end of the British Empire.² It speaks of the ‘dead hand of the past’ which haunted the former dominions or white settler colonies in the wake of the attempts by what many from the 1950s to the 1970s still called the ‘mother country’ to turn to Europe and join the European Economic Community. Clark names the different groups – Aborigines, British, Europeans, and Asians – in the sequence of their settling the land, and calls on his listeners to look at history in order to avoid ‘being doomed to go on repeating the past.’ Koch, however, goes beyond the purely national perspective Clark took and presents a transnational study of collective notions of identity in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. As mentioned on the back cover of the book, his aim is to find out which of these notions were apt for the future.

Koch’s book is one of the outcomes of the second phase of the Collaborative Research Centre 923 ‘Threatened Orders – Societies under Stress’ that, between 2015 and 2019, looked at the agency of actors in the re-ordering of societies.³ Not least, therefore, the author refers to

¹ C. Manning Clark, *Writing a History of Australia*, Occasional Papers (Northern Territory Library Service), 8 (Darwin, 1989), 6–7.

² Koch’s book is available in open access at [<https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-161481-1>].

³ See [<https://uni-tuebingen.de/forschung/forschungsschwerpunkte/sonderforschungsbereiche/sfb-923/forschungsprofil/#c1222816>] and [<https://threatened-orders.com>], accessed 5 Jan. 2025. In the context of the study at

this concept again and again. In some contexts, this is very convincing, while in others the study could well have done without it. The same is true for some of the very long footnotes. What is impressive is the enormous amount of literature that the author has analysed, as well as the many archives he has gone to in order to find out how people in the former dominions or white settler colonies came to terms with the challenge that 'coming of age' implied for their collective identities and their self-perception. Based on Anthony G. Hopkins' call for post-colonial experiences in white settler colonies to also be analysed in the context of postcolonial studies,⁴ Koch starts with a concise introduction in which he points to the fact that *formal* independence did not always mean *effective* independence, especially when looking at connections in economic, foreign policy, and cultural terms (p. 19). The latter are of particular interest to Sebastian Koch. As a consequence, economic and foreign policy entanglements only play a very minor role in his analysis, which is a pity, but understandable, as they would have filled another book. Nevertheless, it might have been helpful if the author's introduction had elaborated a little more on how he was going to use his many sources and his rich basis of research literature to make his argument, and why in his view economic or foreign policy entanglements could mostly be left aside in his study.

After his introduction, Koch focuses on the context, looking at issues of the 'End of Empire', the search for new identities, and theoretical concepts from postcolonial studies to theories of identity. Consistently taking a transnational perspective, the author is able to convincingly show the overarching crises of identity in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, but at the same time misses out on some peculiarities of the three countries. A particularly notable further omission is the impact of the post-Second World War migration of people of non-British European and, later, Asian origin that Clark mentioned in his 1987 lecture. Although people from Ukraine, Croatia, Greece, and later Vietnam

hand, it might even have been useful if the author had reflected on the extent to which the societies in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand were really under threat (*Bedrohung*), or whether 'in danger' (*gefährdet*) might not have been the more appropriate wording.

⁴ Anthony G. Hopkins, 'Globalisation and Decolonisation', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45/5 (2017), 729–45.

and China did not shape the collective identities of the whole of Australia, Canada, or New Zealand, they nevertheless had a significant impact on at least parts of these countries. As words mean different things to different people, a more specific analysis of what the terms 'Britishness', 'whiteness', and 'family values' meant to these people, as well as those of Aboriginal or British descent, could furthermore have led to a more differentiated perspective on words that Koch so often uses in a very generalized manner.

In his third part, the author focuses on the cultural cringe in the three former dominions. His focus is on fears of Americanization (mainly in Canada and New Zealand), the ambivalent experience of distance, and the role of historiography. In order to avoid being accused of focusing too much on an academic or elitist discourse, as in an analysis of the role of the Massey Commission appointed on 8 April 1949 to investigate the state of arts and culture in Canada, Koch tries to include the voices of 'ordinary citizens', but he is not really successful in this, probably because he does not properly reflect on how much 'letters to the editor'—his main source in this context—truly reflect the 'voice' of ordinary people. Furthermore, Koch's use of such letters does not follow a systematic form of analysis. Instead, he uses many of them to confirm findings he has drawn from his rich knowledge of the research literature in the field. The author's discussion of the role of historians is more successful. It is exciting to see how historians like Manning Clark or Kenneth Sinclair tried to gain influence on identity politics and social change in Australia as well as New Zealand. Although they sought to include the history of both Aboriginal Australia and Maori New Zealand—or 'Aotearoa', as the Maori call their country—Koch convincingly shows in this context how far from really giving a voice to the First Nations these historians nevertheless remained. The fact that the author calls this subchapter a digression and mainly focuses on the two historians mentioned, rather than presenting a full analysis, for example of the debates in the Australian cultural journal *Meanjin*, is typical of a book that gives many great insights, but does not really present the in-depth discussion that many aspects such as this one would have deserved.

The fourth and longest part of the study deals with the search for a new identity or identities, in order to overcome the cringe discussed in

part three. Here Koch's focus is on more specific debates and discourses in the three former colonies, such as the issues of a new flag or a new national anthem, the 1967 International and Universal Exposition in Montreal (Expo 67), as well as debates on whether the three countries should become republics in order to sever their ties with Great Britain. The study is strongest when the author focuses on in-depth empirical analysis, such as the debate on the replacement of the Canadian Red Ensign with the Maple Leaf Flag (which he could, however, have linked to similar discussions in Australia),⁵ or the debates on national anthems in Australia and New Zealand. The issues of bi- or multiculturalism are also interesting, but suffer from the above-mentioned weakness that the author did not really include non-British migrants in the story. This becomes specifically clear when Koch talks about Maori fears of losing their status as *tangata whenua* (original people) in a multicultural New Zealand (p. 417). Similarly, it is not enough just to present the front cover image of Maitland Steinkopf, head of the Manitoba Centennial Corporation, in a constructed 'unity in diversity' costume made up of an indigenous feather headdress, a Hungarian traditional costume, German lederhosen, a Ukrainian sash, Dutch clogs, and an Irish shillelagh (p. 375) without giving at least a rough analysis of the idea(s) behind it.

In his well-structured summary, Koch looks back at the opportunities and threats that the three countries faced. He reviews again the debates on nationalism—especially among the elite rather than the 'ordinary people'—and, in reference to the Collaborative Research Centre in Tübingen, the attempts to re-order society. The efforts to establish multiculturalism as a 'new myth', collaborative approaches between the three countries, and the long shadow of the empire are the last three aspects the authors picks up again in his final chapter. Koch is probably right that 'Britishness', whatever it meant and means to different people, continued (and continues) to have a strong appeal in all three of the countries he investigates, and not least therefore, this reviewer would have wished to have seen more of a *longue durée* perspective on identity constructions in this study. As the book stands, it

⁵ See Carol A. Foley, *The Australian Flag: Colonial Relic or Contemporary Icon?* (Leichhardt, NSW, 1996), one of the few titles missing from Koch's study.

almost looks as if nothing before 1945 was really relevant, either for Australia, Canada, or New Zealand. This is a pity. Sebastian Koch's study is an important milestone in the study of former dominions or white settler colonies in the post-Second World War era, but it is not successful in all its particulars. Primary sources should not primarily serve just an illustrative purpose (e.g. p. 430). Instead, they should form the empirical basis for results that the author has drawn from his analysis. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in this study, which nevertheless forms an important starting point for readers in the Germanophone parts of the world.

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