



## Opening the Boundaries of Citizenship

*The Imperial Citizen: British India and French Algeria*

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Seven members of the G20 group of the world's largest economies began life as European settler states. The racial tensions and challenges faced by immigrants and indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States of America are well known. Is there something in the common origins of these states that explains why these problems persist? This programme looks at the ways people in the nineteenth century imagined settler societies would become individual sovereign states. It does so by discussing the legacy of Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Famous as a founding father of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, Wakefield and his vision of Anglophone settler societies give us a key to understanding the common political problems these countries face today.

In terms of scale, the nineteenth century was an era of unprecedented European emigration, with sixty million people leaving Europe. If the American Revolution exposed the political pitfalls faced by European states possessing colonies, it also hinted at the great promise of colonists as self-reliant trading partners, and by the 1850s, Great Britain had a global established network of largely self-governing settler colonies.

For the advocates of settler colonisation, the key to a colony's success was the ability of its people to improve and exploit the land. The source of prosperity and social order in such new colonies, would not be the wealth or the administrative control of the colonising power, but the settlers themselves. As Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*, 'The colony of a civilized nation which takes possession either of a waste country, or of one so thinly inhabited that the natives easily give place to the new settlers, advances more rapidly to wealth and greatness than any other human society.'

Colonization was also seen as a means of relieving the poverty and widespread political unrest following the end of the Napoleonic wars. By the time Wakefield wrote in the 1830s, the low numbers of willing migrants and the high cost of labour in the colonies combined with ongoing political unrest in Britain led many to see the policy as a failure.

Wakefield saw the social homogeneity of the colonies of his own time as the ultimate cause of their failure to develop as civilizations. Writing about Australia in his first pamphlet in 1820, Wakefield noted, 'We are in a barbarous condition, like that of every people scattered over a territory immense in proportion to their numbers; every man is obliged to occupy himself with questions of daily bread; there is neither leisure nor reward for the investigation of abstract truth ; money-getting is the universal object; taste, science, morals, manners, abstract politics, are subjects of little interest, unless they happen to bear upon the wool question; and, what is more deplorable, we have not any prospect of a change for the better.' In other words, the settler was a paradoxical figure in the story of imperial expansion: a representative and carrier of superior civilization, but also deprived of that culture and those political structures that made the individual civilized.

In Wakefield's view the wrong kind of people had been attracted to the colonies.

Land was too plentiful there. Labourers soon became landowners, driving up the cost of labour and preventing the improvement of the land. Wakefield thought that the steady supply of cheap wage labour could be maintained by keeping land prices at a high 'sufficient price.' Artificial prices would also encourage the formation of different social classes, promoting the settlement of professionals as well as farmers. Karl Marx in his great work *Capital*, criticised Wakefield for creating a system for 'the manufacture of wage-labourers.' For Wakefield, a thriving colonial society would be an unequal one.

Wakefield not only wanted to create greater social inequality in settler societies, gender distribution was another key requirement. For Wakefield, settler society's tendency to social degeneration stemmed in part from the high ratio of men to women. Wakefield actively encouraged settlement by young couples and by single women, in the belief that it would provide a moral spur to action absent in the male-dominated society so typical of new colonies: 'Each female would have a special protector from the moment of her departure from home. No man would have any excuse for dissolute habits.' In common with many other promoters of controlled settlement, he saw the family not only as the key to the demographic stability of the colony but also to its social order.

In Wakefield's view the success of colonization also depended on the superiority of the 'British' or Anglo-Saxon race. As he wrote in a book entitled *The Art of Colonization*:

I doubt whether a purely Milesian-Irish or Celtic-French colony, however well it should be governed, would be anything like as good a customer of its mother-country, as a purely English or Lowland Scotch colony.

His use of phrases such as 'Celtic French' or 'Milesian-Irish', reminds us of the extent to which white national identities were fragmented, overlapping and highly politicized in the period he wrote.

Wakefield's writings reveal the insecurity about European civilization that underpinned settler state formation in the 1850s and 1860s. The growth of settler colonialism prompted new understandings of the role of the citizen and the state in those societies. In part this was necessitated by the physical situation, beyond the confines of the 'mother country' or 'metropole' as historians call it. While settler colonialism depends on concepts of race and class associated with nationalism or imperialism, it also makes unique assumptions about the political capacities of the individual settler compared to the refined citizen of the metropole, to be found in the great cities such as London or Birmingham.

This has two main implications. Firstly it shows that creating national sovereignty for settler societies was seen as a method of constructing and imposing western order and civilization on those people who were supposed to deliver it. After all this is why Wakefield is considered as a founding figure in three different countries. Secondly, the writings of people like Wakefield help us to understand why such states were formed in the way they were – why it was so important to the founders to create a sense of racial homogeneity, to encourage social inequality and to divide the land in ways which excluded local indigenous populations. Promoters of settler societies such as Wakefield worried about who was being sent out and what qualities individuals would need in order to be good citizens of a prosperous society. As a result, genocide, racial segregation and wealth inequality were not simply accidents of history, they were often deliberate tools of social engineering and a means of deciding who could and who could not be a citizen. The legacies of political thinkers such as Wakefield live on in the ethnic divisions and aboriginal land claims that still dominate life in many former settler states today.