

Camps, Carcerality, and Late Victorian Empire: In Conversation with Aidan Forth's *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*

Barrington Walker

Volume 31, numéro 2, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084736ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084736ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Walker, B. (2021). Camps, Carcerality, and Late Victorian Empire: In Conversation with Aidan Forth's *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 31(2), 63–66. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084736ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article est un court essai critique du récent ouvrage primé d'Aidan Forth, *Barbed Wire Imperialism*, lauréat du prix Ferguson 2019 de la Société historique du Canada. L'essai propose quelques potentialités légèrement différentes au niveau des priorités à mettre de l'avant, des trajectoires, des lentilles interprétatives et, peut-être, des possibilités. Parmi celles-ci, citons la centralité du navire d'esclaves et de l'esclavage transatlantique pour réfléchir aux racines de la carcéralité dans l'Empire britannique.

Camps, Carcerality, and Late Victorian Empire: In Conversation with Aidan Forth's *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*

BARRINGTON WALKER

Abstract

This paper is a brief critical review essay of Aidan Forth's recent award-winning work Barbed Wire Imperialism, winner of the 2019 Ferguson Prize of the Canadian Historical Association. The essay suggests a few potential slightly different emphases, trajectories, interpretive lenses and, perhaps, possibilities. Included among these are the centrality of the slave ship and transatlantic slavery for thinking about the roots of carcerality in the British Empire.

Résumé

Cet article est un court essai critique du récent ouvrage primé d'Aidan Forth, Barbed Wire Imperialism, lauréat du prix Ferguson 2019 de la Société historique du Canada. L'essai propose quelques potentialités légèrement différentes au niveau des priorités à mettre de l'avant, des trajectoires, des lentilles interprétatives et, peut-être, des possibilités. Parmi celles-ci, citons la centralité du navire d'esclaves et de l'esclavage transatlantique pour réfléchir aux racines de la carcéralité dans l'Empire britannique.

Aidan Forth's *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876–1903* is an exemplary work of transnational history. Forth uses camps as a focus to tether complex multilayered histories at during the late Victorian period, and to think through the contradictions of the liberal empire. Exploring Britain's "Empire of Camps" in India and South Africa, Forth trains his considerable analytical prowess on an oft-overlooked site of the British Empire.

Forth argues that the camp was the answer to a series of crises—crises of "famine, plague and war" (17) that emerged in the British empire during this period. Ten million women, men, and children, says Forth, were concentrated in these camps in a nearly forgotten history. Drawing on the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Antonio Agamben, and Homi Bhaba, Forth provides a rich analytical lens through which to explore the tensions of this time. The camp was a physical space that was replicated across borders and yet its emergence in each locale was sensitive to the specificity of that particular locale—military histories, populations, and contexts in which the "distressed

subjects” of imperial Britain found themselves. For Forth, the camp was a technology of governance and imperial legibility. The camps were the result of an epistemic framework based on curing or rehabilitating diseased bodies. Thus, this was a project of imperial governance that was thoroughly biopolitical. The technologies of biopolitical governance that “emerged from evolving government rationales—an imperial complex of shared mindsets and mentalities—that circulated throughout the empires and cultures of Western civilization.” (19) As the world’s leading industrial and imperial power, nineteenth-century Britain synthesized many of the “basic ingredients” that would generate camps throughout the twentieth century.

One of the many things I appreciate about this fine book is its engagement with history as a “genealogy of the present.” Ruminating on the “Twentieth Century Legacies” of Britain’s “Empire of Camps,” Forth asks, “How, ultimately, did Britain’s empire of camps contribute to the modern world?” (26) The camps, says Forth, were “generated by a colonial culture of confinement and control that originated in the nineteenth century, camps have outlasted the world wars and discredited Nazi and Soviet empires to remain integral features of our contemporary political landscape.” (26) Centring his understanding of liberal empire in the camps’ histories of the present, Forth argues that while it is true that in the decade after the Second World War Britain detained Kikuyu in Kenya and ethnic Chinese in Malaya, he notes that similarly Canada, the United States, and Britain also interned Japanese and Germans during the Great Wars. This acknowledges the legacy of what the British dubbed “concentration camps” during the Anglo-Boer war in the British Imperial World or at least the Anglo-American World—and their anticipation of “future practices of military internment, political detention, and racial violence.” (27) But “its most direct line of descent,” says Forth, “leads to contemporary shelters and detention centers housing refugees and displaced persons under international humanitarian management.” (27) Ultimately, Forth maintains that this empire of British camps no less than “laid the foundations for the Anglo-American political traditions that would remake the world in the wake of World War II.” (28)

As scholars are wont to do, these arguments have me selfishly thinking about some of my own work. Indeed, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* this is a work that I wish I had read before completing one of my more

recent works, a survey of Race, Colonization and Canada's Racial State. What my more recent work has in common with Forth's, I think, is an attempt to map the genealogies of our contemporary world by thinking about the nature of British liberal empire—its complexities and contradictions. What follows here is not a fundamental quarrel with Forth's main arguments nor his substantive conclusions. Rather my intervention is more in the realm of slightly different emphases, trajectories, interpretive lenses and, perhaps, possibilities.

"Above all," Forth says, "camps emerged within a 'carceral archipelago' of "prisons, workhouses, factories, and hospitals that organized nineteenth-century people and places." (32) But, in this telling, the prison is a function of "normal" judicial procedure while the camp was temporary and extrajudicial (33-4). Forth, drawing on the work of Marcus Rediker, notes that "slave ships were perhaps the world's first concentration camps." (34) But the path where that might lead is not fully explored. Perhaps because Forth wants to tell a slightly different story of British imperial modernity and British imperial liberalism. From the fleeting mention of the slave ship, Forth then moves quickly to a discussion of abolition (1833 in the British Empire), and from there a quick jump to imperial work departments that "became centres of expertise in billeting and supervising workers." (34-5). For Forth, a global system of migrant workers emerged, quickly in the wake of emancipation, who lived in a world of surveillance, discipline, and control using enclosed barracks and compounds. (35) "Such facilities," says Forth, "recalled earlier modes of confining slaves, reviving practices of bygone eras." (35)

Perhaps, though, a few divergent epistemological and analytical trajectories are opened when one reorients the temporal and spatial dimensions of the carceral archipelago that moors this work. The slave ship that only fleetingly slips through this work is key here—as is the slave ship's afterlife.

Forth argues that the "same forces" that generated prisons, factories, and workhouses in nineteenth-century Britain created colonial camps (alongside convict settlements and other imperial enclosures). We must also consider, however, the reality that the slave ship, the plantation, and its afterlife in the inner city "state of exception" are also foundational and enduring carceral archipelagos.⁸ The trajectory of slave ship to slave pen to prison to carceral city/state is one spatial imaginary of enclosure that is a central feature of the racial colonial state (along with the cordoning off and enclosure of Indigenous people that Forth notes in his work), but the futurity of the plantation also

contains registers of surveillance, panopticism, racial liberalism, and modernity's chronotopes (time spaces).⁹

The trajectory of the slave ship, its afterlife, and its characteristics of carcerality and surveillance is relatively straightforward. The slave ship was indeed, to recall Marcus Reidiker's well-known observation, both a floating garrison and a prison.¹⁰ One could scarcely imagine an analysis of chattel slavery that did not recognize the centrality of surveillance, policing, and the panoptic gaze to the constitution and perpetuation of the institution. And, indeed, much of the historiography of slavery in the Atlantic World has framed the history of the institution as a system of controls. The system of controls that emerged on the plantation constituted a set of foundational technologies of surveillance and carcerality.

Racial liberalism also was a central feature of the British racial empire. The idea that the unruly, the uncivilized, and the unknowable could be made knowable and legible once again can be traced to the histories of the slave ships and their afterlives, where the violent act of enslavement created "slaves," cargo, and fungible property made legible through the ledgers that marked ship manifests and bills of sale. But it was the promise of the civilizing mission that allowed for the possibility—however remote—that the enslaved could make the slow journey from property to personhood. Lastly, we need to consider the reality that though slavery routinely occupies a space of the "pre-industrial" in the historical imagination—it was not, as many scholars have noted. Just as modern capitalism was built in and through the plantation so too were the systems of labour discipline and capitalist modes of production that characterized the industrial age.¹¹

Again, what I have presented here are suggestions for what might have been had this work slightly altered its origin story and its course. There is no disputing that Forth has written an outstanding book. It will make an enduring contribution to the ways in which we think about new and innovative ways of mapping and imagining empire. It is clearly an excellent choice for the Wallace K. Ferguson Prize.

BARRINGTON WALKER is Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University.

BARRINGTON WALKER est professeur d'histoire à l'Université Wilfrid Laurier.