

Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write Home About: British Family Correspondence and the Settler Colonial Everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019). 291 pp. Hardcover \$89.95, Paperback \$34.95

Studies of settler colonialism in Canada and the British Empire are central aspects of what has come to be known as the “New Imperial History.” These studies most often focus on the interactions between colonizers and Indigenous peoples, and particularly on either the mechanisms used to dispossess Indigenous peoples of land and rights or on the sites of intimacy that were central to the colonial project. Ishiguro’s *Nothing to Write Home About* builds on these bodies of scholarship but rejects a specific focus on Indigenous-settler relations. Ishiguro argues that historians have yet to understand the “affective and everyday configurations of white settler power in Canada, which should be understood as crucial and complicit in colonialism” (214) and focuses on how a white British settler society formed in British Columbia between 1858 and 1914. To do this, she explores how the post operated as a function of empire and assesses a large body of British family correspondence to explore the “banal” topics central to family communications including food, family, and death. These letters, she contends, translated “broad settler colonial ideas into something unremarkable, personal, and everyday” (215). In re-writing their everyday lives as “banal and unchallenged” in letters home to their families, British settlers re-made British Columbia into a place they could understand as a “conceivable and comfortable home” (214).

One of the book’s contributions to the New Imperial History and trans-imperial family history is Ishiguro’s innovative interrogations of the family correspondence. Thousands of letters written between Britons in British Columbia and their families in Britain and elsewhere in the British Empire are the central sources for the book. Family correspondence is a key source in the study of trans-imperial families (see Adele Perry, Elizabeth Buettner, Durba Ghosh), but historians have most often drawn on such letters for insight into familial relationships or to fill in the gaps left by other records in the colonial archive. Trans-imperial family correspondence was born out of the willingness of trans-imperial families to move to and remain in the colonies. Britons did so because they believed the colonies provided opportunities unavailable in the metropole; the “profits of empire” in turn sustained the families both in Britain and abroad (213).

Ishiguro’s exploration of the correspondence as constitutive knowledge of British Columbia is a departure from most studies of trans-imperial families. Ishiguro argues that the migrations of trans-imperial families and the family correspondence resulting from these travels were central to how the metropole came to

know remote and often under-reported colonies, including British Columbia. “We cannot fully understand the relationship between metropole and empire without engaging with family correspondence,” she contends. “These letters rendered colonial places like British Columbia not as a mere margin but as an intimate part of both family and empire at home” (214). Ishiguro’s argument that family correspondence itself “formed a powerful part of the settler colonial project of dispossession, marginalization, resettlement, and erasure” (8) is an innovative approach to trans-imperial correspondence and Canada’s connection to the British Empire.

Ishiguro also notes of the family correspondence that British settlers on the whole marginalized a key aspect of the settler project—Indigenous-settler relations. She is quick to point out that the absence of Indigenous peoples in the correspondence does not mean that settler-Indigenous relations in British Columbia were marginal to the lives of British settlers. Rather, assessing “the unexamined and interrelated significance of the everyday and trans-imperial family in the local and global history of settler colonialism” reveals that these epistolary silences about Indigenous peoples and other “anxiet[ies] and vulnerabilit[ies]” were part of an effort on the part of British settlers to “produce and entrench shared understandings of British Columbia as an unremarkable settler place” (8). In re-making British Columbia as a “familiar and familial home” where their daily lives were “unremarkable” and “unchallenged” British settlers defined settler colonial “normal” and entrenched their power as white settlers (8).

The book covers a wide range of topics in the chapters, which are divided into three sections in the book. The first section examines the postal system and family letters. The second section examines the “commonplace” in settler life by examining “unremarkable” colonial “knowledge” (Ch. 3) and settler food practices (Ch. 4). The last section of the book explores “family faultlines” by exploring family death and correspondence and strategic family silences in letters. These seemingly disparate topics are interwoven with the central threads of settler colonialism and trans-imperial family relations to produce a cohesive and sophisticated analysis.

Two of the chapters stand out. Chapter 3 “Absolutely Nothing Going On: Epistolary Emotion and Unremarkable Colonial Knowledge” and Chapter 6 “Say Nothing: Epistolary Gossip, Silence, and the Strategic Limits of Intimacy” both provide methodological models on how to read family correspondence for absence. This is more than just “reading against the grain;” in these chapters Ishiguro purposefully and methodically interrogates the “banal” and the absences in the letters to reveal, in Chapter 3, how settlers worked to shift understandings of their inhabited space to redefine settler space as “unnoteworthy,” thereby providing important insights into the operation of settler colonialism. In Chapter 6, she similarly pursues silences in the letters through some impressive archival sleuthing to reveal that acceptable colonial practices like interracial marriage were considered untranslatable to family in the metropole. These two chapters are important not only for the perspectives they offer to British Columbia history, trans-imperial family history, and

settler colonialism studies, but also for the clear and specific methodological models Ishiguro offers for assessing family correspondence.

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