The physical and spiritual journeys of Australia's first bishop

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Abstract

Spirituality and journeying have long informed one another, both in people’s life experiences and literary endeavours. Spiritualities within the Christian tradition and their relationship to travel have been most commonly explored with reference to the pilgrims of the middle ages and the missionary men and women of more recent centuries. The people by whom Christianity was introduced to Australia are worthy of similar attention as travellers. As archdeacon of New South Wales and, later, Bishop of Australia, William Grant Broughton was for more than thirty years one of colonial Australia’s most important religious travellers. His journeys included four sea voyages between London and Sydney, a missionary trip to New Zealand and numerous horseback tours of the colony totalling more than ten thousand kilometres in extent.

Scholars to date have declined to explore the significance of journeying for the development of Christianity in colonial Australia or for the spiritual development of its adherents. In both G P Shaw’s scholarly biography and F T Whittington’s more celebratory narrative, William Broughton’s journeys are considered incidental to his ideas about the colony and the conduct of his ministry rather than as experiences which fundamentally shaped them. It is apparent from Broughton’s journals that his spiritual identity and religious ideals on the one hand, and his approach to and experience of travelling on the other, were dynamically and inextricably related. This renders all the more important Broughton’s discussion as a traveller and not merely as an ecclesiastic who undertook journeys. I propose to raise and pursue that discussion with particular reference to his 1829 journal of the voyage to Sydney Cove and his visitation journals for the year 1843. In reading these texts as travel narratives, it will become clear that Broughton’s initial reservations about travel when mixed with ministry were transformed by the ideas and impressions he gathered in the course of his trips – with important consequences for the ways in which he perceived his surrounds and described his experiences in writing.