In recent years there has been a surge of scholarly interest in the policies and practices of protection in British colonies in the nineteenth century. As colonial projects began, faltered, flourished, and bedded down in the Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, Asia, and the Americas they were frequently enabled by the office of “Protector” or “Guardian”: European administrators charged with controlling, protecting, and shielding vulnerable populations from the violence of colonialism, settlement, slavery, or indentured labour. Hence, throughout the British Empire there were Protectors of slaves, Aboriginal people, Chinese (miners), and immigrants, usually Chinese or Indian indentured labourers. Their jurisdictions were frequently known as Protectorates. This special issue of *Pacific Historical Review* proceeds from the assumption that there is useful insight to be gained by placing these varied subjects and locales of protection into the same analytic frame. It seeks
to probe how the concept and language of protection, Protectorates, and Protectors came to be applied to such a diverse range of subjects, across time and space. The intersection of the concept of protection with the global circulation of ideas, practices, and personnel; the political economy of imperialism; and the development of modern modes of governance forms an important element of such inquiry. The collection also aims to explore the empire-wide influences on the evolution and practice of protection and to examine the ways in which its legacies fed into later laws and policy decisions in relation to Indigenous peoples, in particular. The office of Protector also created an important archive of testimony from imperial subjects, and the limits and possibilities of knowledge derived from that source forms another locus of inquiry.

Protection was a global phenomenon. Yet when tracing protection from one colony to another, scholars have done so largely with an eye to the influence of British humanitarianism on imperial practice. One common assumption is that British humanitarians created the idea of protection which, as Alan Lester and Fae Dussart have elegantly described, travelled from “Trinidad across the Caribbean, thence to Tasmania . . . was refined in Britain . . . with reference to the Cape Colony of South Africa, and was then imported to New South Wales in Australia, travelling finally to Aotearoa New Zealand.” Lester and Dussart, moreover, were concerned to articulate the processes through which protection in particular, and humanitarianism in general, were imbricated into the governance structures of settler societies. Tony Ballantyne went a step further and insisted that protection was a “legitimating device for empire.”

The words protection and humanitarianism are often conflated in the scholarly literature and their outcomes indistinguishable from each other. Hence, scholars often use protection and humanitarianism as synonyms; we, however, would like to insist that protection deserves more singular


attention. It is one of the purposes of this collection to at once acknowledge the conceptual links between protection and humanitarianism, while also drawing out the specificities of protection by giving detailed attention to the bureaucratic post of Protector or Guardian and by examining the legacies of protection in later laws and policy regimes. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanitarianism has been the subject of voluminous scholarship, particularly its relationship to the abolition of slavery and the growth of concern about the impact of imperialism and colonialism on subject peoples. Discussions of protection are often folded into this literature, and conclusions about it echo the tenor of historiography on humanitarianism more generally. The twin insights that, first, each local site of imperialism was connected through networks of knowledge and physical mobility and, second, it is impossible to separate the humanitarian project of this period from the imperial context in which it operated, apply equally to protection and humanitarianism. This literature has also shown that the history of humanitarianism is indivisible from imperialism’s self-justification as a project capable of bringing civilisation to savages, and it has demonstrated the frequent (but never complete) association between protection and control, violence and dispossession.4

Thus the emphasis in a great deal of existing historiography about protection is on British colonialism, especially its settler colonial variants and the policies of protection developed for Indigenous peoples, which coincided exactly with the zenith of a high-profile humanitarian movement in Britain. The protection of slaves in the British Empire, despite its temporal precedence, has drawn less inquiry from historians, and its earlier manifestations in Spanish, Dutch, and French colonialism even less so. Rather, much scholarly attention has been directed towards the period after the success of the United Kingdom’s Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. In this context, the 1837 *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*, chaired by Thomas Fowell Buxton, has assumed central importance. Although the Southern Pacific was not the primary locus of inquiry, the report revealed a catalogue of horrors about the treatment and current state of many of the empire’s “natives.” It recommended that much more be done to “protect” Indigenous groups in British colonies, and more particularly to “civilize and Christianize” them. The Buxton report therefore stands as the moment when colonialism was rebranded as potentially being of benefit to the peoples it was displacing. The subsequent adoption of humanitarian discourse by governments, missionaries, thinkers, and scientists enabled settler nations to present themselves as good, moral, and spiritual, as engaging in the “right” kind of colonialism. Kenton Storey has insisted that it is important to distinguish between rhetorical and evangelical humanitarianism. The former frequently masked the more nefarious motives of colonists who paid lip service to the notion of concern for the colonised, but the latter stemmed from a Christian commitment to the humanity of subject peoples. Both retained unshakeable faith, however, in the redemptive power of empire.

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This collection, with contributors who largely work and research in the Antipodes, is rooted in this scholarship, but it attempts to push the chronology and geography of protection much further than has previously been attempted. The authors here see protection as a set of practices and discourses with a global lineage with a reach beyond the confines of the relationship of British colonists to Indigenous peoples. To take one example, the tension between subjugation and humanitarianism that existed in British colonies was contemporaneous in the United States. In an 1866 report to the U.S. Congress in response to the massacre at Fort Phil Kearny, Special Agent E.B. Chandler wrote from Fort Laramie to advise that the “friendly” Indians at the Agency receive the “protection and the necessary subsistence from the United States.” Chandler saw the choice as a simple one. “In my opinion,” he summarised, “the alternative of feeding or fighting them must soon be chosen. As economy, as well as justice, would indicate the adoption of the former policy, I have no hesitation in recommending its adoption.” Here, made plain, is the dilemma that spurred the humanitarian urges of the period: violent policies or humane ones, with the latter held up as the better alternative for spiritual, moral, and even economic reasons.

Locating the discourse of protection in the United States not only contributes to ongoing injunctions to historians to see that country as less exceptional. It also shows the value of seeing U.S. history through the lens of global imperialism and settler colonialism. U.S. historians have taken up the concept of settler colonialism with some hesitation, concerned that it cannot encompass the particularities of U.S. colonialism, especially in borderland regions. Indigenous critical theorists, though, remind us that we need to see U.S. settler colonialism as a unique but nevertheless connected part of a global phenomenon. The history of the United States is replete with moments when federal and state governments used the discourse of


humanitarianism to “protect” groups that were considered vulnerable—but also “other”—and stood at the crossroads between settler colonial power and humanitarian sentiment. The removal of Indigenous nations to far-flung reservations overseen by government agents during the nineteenth century is an obvious correlative. If we move past the colonial binary, we might even place Japanese internment camps of the twentieth century and the detention of refugees in Guantanamo Bay and other domestic residential centres in this context.

A key intervention of these articles, then, is to extend the analysis of protection beyond the boundaries of British settler colonialism and see it as a broad, world-shaping process. Christina Twomey opens the issue with a historiographical argument for understanding protection as a concept with its origins in European, rather than British, colonialism. The remaining articles unearth the discourse of protection in chronologically and geographically diverse contexts: Natal, Australia, Berbice, New Zealand, and the United States. They encompass British, North American, and Dutch colonialism and address periods that span from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Together these articles show how enduring and widespread the discourse of protection was both before and beyond the period and places usually addressed by historians.

In addition to this geographic and temporal reach, the articles here share three unifying aims. First, in attempting to push the study of protection beyond the binary of coloniser/Indigenous, several of the authors focus on protective efforts aimed at indentured labour. The discourse of protection is often seen as something that originated in humanitarian movements directed at slavery and then later became part of the operation of settler colonialism. Adding the stories of slaves and indentured workers to the history of protection in the nineteenth century does not so much bypass this chronology as show the broader extent of colonialism’s ability to establish “colonializing liberalisms . . . through force, violence, and genocide in order to make freedom available for some and not others,” as Jodi Byrd has put it. Trevor Burnard focuses on Protectors of slaves in Berbice in the early to mid-nineteenth century and does detailed work to show how the Dutch office of the fiscal Protector was converted into a British one—demonstrating in

10. Byrd, Transit of Empire, 221.
a local context the important point that protection derived from European legal codes. Goolam Vahed analyses the conflicting allegiances of the Protectors appointed to lobby on behalf of immigrant Indian indentured labourers being mistreated by their employers in late nineteenth-century Natal.

A second aim common to the authors in this collection is to demonstrate the capacity of the records of Protectorate schemes to generate insights into how subjects perceived not just protection but other processes like colonisation, labour, and enslavement. Giving the subjects of protective policies and schemes a voice and showing their ability to use the discourse to their advantage as well as to endure it has been a guiding theme for all the authors who have read their archives carefully to privilege non-coloniser experiences. Rachel Standfield uses comparative analysis to put those moments when impulses of protection, control, language acquisition, and colonialism collided into chronological and geographical perspective in Australia and New Zealand in the 1840s, using the records of these diverse Protectorates to recover the perspectives of Māori and Koori subjects. Burnard makes unearthing the words of West Indian slaves in Berbice his priority in understanding how the office of the Fiscal operated in the early nineteenth century. Vahed shows how Indian indentured labourers in Natal found creative ways to force their Protectors to work to their advantage but also explores the intimate biographies of the Protectors themselves. Amanda Nettelbeck explores the South Australian Aborigines’ use of their own physical mobility to evade colonial controls and the measures put in place to stop them from doing just that. Katherine Ellinghaus shows how the Indigenous peoples living in Oklahoma and New South Wales in the twentieth century turned the discourses of assimilation and protection to their advantage.

A third key intervention of this collection is to argue that historians need not be limited by the language of protection. Several articles explore how ideas of protection infused laws and policies that did not necessarily have the word “protect” in their monikers. The humanitarian discourse of safeguard and shelter was often so ubiquitous in government policy that it barely needed to be named. Comparisons across diverse colonial locales are revealing of moments when other kinds of policies re-expressed the tensions and urges of protection. Nettelbeck examines the concept of Aboriginal vagrancy in Australia in the 1840s, demonstrating how a study of protection can also intersect with new scholarship of mobility. Ellinghaus makes a comparative argument about the influence of ideas about protection in assimilation policies of exemption and competency in Oklahoma and New South Wales in
the 1940s and 1950s, showing the long afterlife of protection in other laws and policies in the twentieth century.

Any investigation of the tendency of colonial governments to control by protecting yields diverse stories of violent encounters, legal battles, economic exchange, translation and cultural exchange, activism, resistance, and philanthropic agonising. The actors are diverse in class, gender, and ethnicity—and as these articles show, the relationship between protected and Protector could manifest in many diverse ways. There were many moments when colonisers used the trope of protection to soothe their consciences, justify their crimes, or to find some way to ameliorate the suffering they witnessed. Those who suffered their “protection” negotiated and resisted in unique and unmistakable ways. We offer these articles as a series of small steps towards a greater understanding of the relationship between protection, humanitarianism, and empire as it manifested across time and oceans from the early nineteenth century through the twentieth century.

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