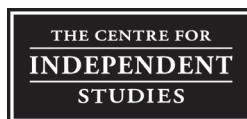




# *The Enlightenment Made Us*

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# *The Enlightenment Made Us*

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# The Enlightenment Made Us

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The Almighty got off to a disastrous start in the colony of NSW. The First Fleet landed at Port Jackson on a Saturday, 26 January 1788. There was little time for ceremony as the convicts and marines set to work. Watkin Tench, the assiduous chronicler of the fleet, describes the scene:

Business now sat on every brow ... in one place, a party cutting down the woods; a second, setting up a blacksmith's forge; a third, dragging along a load of stones or provisions; here an officer pitching his marquee, with a detachment of troops parading on one side of him, and a cook's fire blazing up on the other.<sup>1</sup>

The following day, the First Fleet's chaplain, the Rev. Richard Johnson, tried to organise a church service, but his appeals to the labouring heathens were ignored. They had work to do. The wilderness would not willingly be appropriated; a colony, founded on hitherto unbroken soil, would not build itself. From the beginning, Australia was a place where men worked out their own salvation. The first full Christian service on Australian soil was held under a tree on 3 February, eight days after the landing in Sydney Cove. Holy Communion was not celebrated for another two weeks.<sup>2</sup>

In November, the Rev. Johnson wrote home that he ‘had no great opinion of, nor expectation’ of the colony or its settlers.

No Church is yet begun of, and I am afraid scarcely thought of. Other things seem to be of greater Notice and Concern and most would rather see a Tavern, a Play House, a Brothel—anything sooner than a place for public worship.<sup>3</sup>

The chaplain, an accomplished farmer, warned that Australia—spiritually as well as temporally—was a land of stony soil. Of the convicts, he wrote:

They neither see nor will be persuaded to seek the Lord of mercy and compassion of God. They prefer their lust before their souls, yea, most of them will sell their souls for a glass of grog, so blind, so foolish, so hardened are they.<sup>4</sup>

The construction of a church was so low on the list of civic priorities that the Rev. Johnson was still waiting five years later. He built a temporary church at his own expense. The bill was not insubstantial: £67. He sought reimbursement from the British government in a letter to Secretary of State Henry Dundas:

Public works of different kinds have been, and still continue to be, so urgent that no place of any kind has yet been erected for the purpose of performing divine service ... there has been too general and repeated neglect shown to public worship.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, he expressed his ardent desire to see the colonists ‘to attend more willingly, and consequently more regularly, upon the solemn and public worship of God.’ The money was not immediately forthcoming.

On one level, the godlessness of the convicts is easily explained; the indifference of hardened marines towards the divinity is also unsurprising. The attitude of Captain Arthur Phillip and his successors, however, the leaders and architects of the colony, demands a deeper explanation. It lies in the philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment and man's altered relationship with God.

The Pilgrim Fathers settled in the United States in 1620 in a very different cultural climate. The superstitious world in the early seventeenth century science was a case of hit and miss. As Francis Bacon began piecing together the scientific method, witches were being burned at the stake. In Italy, Galileo Galilei was under virtual house arrest after being ordered by the Roman Inquisition to renounce his Copernican opinions. The science was settled, they told him: the Sun revolved around the Earth and not the other way round. People lived in fear of God on whom they depended for benevolence. Consequently, the clergy were the cultural elite; they interceded for the Almighty, the source of all wisdom, and therefore, claimed to possess superior insight to that of the common man.

The Pilgrim's turbulent 66-day journey across a sea of troubles rendered the pilgrims sick and exhausted. The art of navigation had improved only slowly. John Davis' treatise, *The Seaman's Secrets*, published in 1594, was a guide to the technology available at the time. It listed three essential instruments for the mariner: charts; the magnetic compass, which had been around since the Han Dynasty; and the cross-staff, which dated back to 400 BC. The astrolabe, according to Davis, was too unreliable for use at sea. The pilgrims had no means of determining longitude, and guesswork was their best guide to progress. It is understandable, therefore, that when land appeared on the horizon, it must have appeared to them like a blessing from God.

Upon landing at Cape Cod, Massachusetts, William Bradford tells us, 'They fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof.' Yet there was a sense of despair and helplessness as they faced what Bradford



describes as ‘a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of beasts and wild men.’ Bradford describes their predicament: ‘What now could sustain them but the spirit of God and his grace?’<sup>6</sup>

Their tribulations were only just beginning. By March 1621, four cold months after landing at Plymouth, more than half of the pilgrims had died from disease. They had arrived too late for the growing season, and survival of the few during that first harsh winter was a miracle of sorts. The soil needed organic matter, nitrogen and potash, but the science that gave that knowledge was at least a century away. The first year in the Puritan’s utopia was a year in hell at the mercy of God, a place of disease, starvation and suffering. Nonetheless, in the autumn of 1621, they held a day of thanksgiving for the Lord’s benevolence, an event that was to become one of the two celebrations of American nationhood. Robert Hughes was mistaken: the eastern coast of the United States, not Australia, was the real *fatal shore*.

Life in the infant colony of NSW, ‘on a stretch of arid soil ... between the gloomy cliffs of the Blue Mountains and the empty and uncharted sea,’<sup>7</sup> was undoubtedly tough. This was not a land of abundance—it was a land of raw, untamed wilderness where scratching a living in the early years of settlement could seem impossibly hard. Fortune, however, was not in the lap of the gods: it was in the settlers’ power to improve their lot with the works of their hands.

In the history of colonial settlement, Australia and New Zealand stand apart. Their rate of economic growth is astounding. The stability of their democratic institutions and the vibrancy of their civic life make them the standout success stories of the colonial project.

The radical nationalist historians’ obsession with brutality has badly distorted the Australian story.

Australia was not a place of condemnation but of redemption. It was a place where earthly sufferings were not endured but overcome. It was a place where man was in control of his destiny.

The ability of applied science to ease the friction of everyday life was apparent from the moment the First Fleet set out from Portsmouth.

Captain Phillip headed confidently towards the South Atlantic on HMS *Sirius*, a ship equipped with the latest technology: a chronometer and a sextant issued by the Board of Longitude that would allow him to trace his progress with precision.

Recent medical advances helped ameliorate the threat of scurvy; Captain Phillip persuaded the Admiralty to allocate petty cash to buy fresh supplies along the way. The task of taming a continent was still to come, but its pioneers survived the eight-month journey in relatively good shape; only one of the 212 marines and 24 of the 754 convicts died on the journey, a low death rate made all the more remarkable by the poor state of health of the convicts.<sup>8</sup> Settlement would be hard, but the young colony would be able to draw on advances in scientific agriculture, a field of study that had made rapid progress in eighteenth-century Britain.

The First Fleet included men with a working knowledge of applied agricultural science. Among them was a Cornish farmer and freelance housebreaker, James Ruse, who in 1789 was assigned by Governor Phillip an acre and a half of land near Parramatta as an experiment in self-sufficiency. Ruse applied potash in the form of burnt timber treating eight or nine rods of land a day. Tench wrote: ‘It was not like the government farm, just scratched over, but properly done.’

(More than 150 years before Friedrich von Hayek wrote *The Road to Serfdom*, the advantages of free enterprise and the limits of central planning were already clear in Australia.)

Ruse broke down soil clods by adding the only organic matter to hand—grass and weeds, which would slowly decompose to release nitrogen. After harvest, he sowed turnip seeds, allowing the ground to lie fallow for a year between crops, an adaptation of the four-crop rotation system developed by Charles Townshend in Britain 50 years earlier. Within 18 months, his blossoming smallholding had become an inspiration for what might be achieved, not through the benevolence of an immense and eternal being, but through collective ingenuity and reason, the application of empirical science and its practical arm, technology. Alongside the

narrative of science runs a narrative of redemption—a mere three years after the First Fleet's arrival, a criminal sentenced to hang in Britain had become the instrument of his own salvation, demonstrating that a colony of incarceration might become a land of liberty.

The Enlightenment was mankind's coming of age, the emancipation of human consciousness from ignorance and error, and Australia was its proving ground. In so far as the Europeans were missionaries, they bore testimony to the power of human reason and endeavour. The explorers who forged a route through the Midwest of America were on a mission from God. The great explorers of inland Australia, by contrast, were men of science. Charles Sturt was dispatched to solve the mystery of the inland sea; John McDouall Stuart went in search of pastures and minerals; geologist Paweł Edmund Strzelecki was commissioned to conduct a mineralogical survey of Gippsland and the ill-fated trip of Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills was commissioned by the Royal Society of Victoria.

In the United States, it took a civil war for the values of the Enlightenment to prevail; in the colonies of Australasia, the Enlightenment's narrative of ingenuity and enterprise would be written on a blank slate from the start. Australian settlement was driven by the spirit of progress, and it remained the dominant narrative for most of its settled history. Reason, liberty, individualism and ingenuity were its hallmarks. Pragmatism and common sense were its guides.

Progress, as it was understood in the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth century, was a risk-embracing project of continual improvement, driven by an underlying optimism in man's ability to be the master of his destiny. It stands in stark contrast to the apprehensive, risk-averse spirit of sustainability that overwhelmed Australian intellectual life in the final quarter of the twentieth century. For nineteenth century classical liberals, the horizon stretched towards infinity, and the strands of progress—scientific, technological, industrial, economic and social—were interdependent, mutually reinforcing, and inseparable. Progress, as it was then understood, was quite different from today's *progressiveness* in which social progress is the primary—and often

only—goal. For Enlightenment thinkers, belief in science was unqualified. For the progressives, faith in science and industry is conditional. Their world is finite; meagre resources thwart ambition; and aspiration must be controlled. Attention shifts from production to redistribution, since if one person gains another person loses. Social progress alone serves the common interest. Economic and industrial success are private accomplishments, achieved at the expense of others.

By contrast, in classical liberal thinking, individual achievements contribute to mutual advantage. The benefits of innovation are universal, and in the long run, everybody profits. Humanity is in this thing together; one small step for man can become one giant leap for mankind. The free exchange of goods and ideas are the natural distributors of wealth and knowledge. As William Robertson described it, ‘Industry, knowledge and humanity are linked together by an indissoluble chain.’<sup>9</sup>

In my recent book, *The Lucky Culture*, I characterise the sudden and dramatic paradigm shift in Australia in the early 1970s as the abandonment of the spirit of progress to the spirit of progressivism.

If I had a chance to tinker with the book today, I might speak of the spirit of sustainability—for that word, with its implied limits on growth, stands in stark contrast to the infinite march of progress in which Australians once believed.

Anybody on the wrong side of 50—or perhaps I should say the right side—will remember the confident story of man’s ascendancy as it was once taught in the classroom. Max D. Williams’ school textbook, *Out of the Mist*, published in 1956, celebrated the subjugation of nature in the onward march of Australian progress.

The sound of the axe in that very thick wood was but the forerunner of a multiplicity of noises—the sounds of roaring trains, whirring planes, chugging steamers and purring cars ...

It sounded the trumpet for the start of a mighty pageant—the pageant of civilization spreading through a land that had previously been a backwash of the world.

We can justly be proud of the achievements of our nation for, although Australia is young, much has been achieved.<sup>10</sup>

For the first 180 years of settlement, Australians sometimes argued over the path they should take and the division of the spoils, but the spirit of progress born in the Enlightenment, and sustained by an unconditional faith in science, was seldom in dispute.

Eleven years before the First Fleet left Portsmouth, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* had been a publishing sensation; it sold out in six months. It was the clearest exposition of the new science of economics. In the period between the voyages of Captain James Cook and the founding of the colony of NSW, Smith pondered what would happen if a civilised nation were to take possession of a thinly populated wilderness.

Surely, he could only be thinking of Australia when he predicted that such a nation would advance 'more rapidly to wealth and greatness than any other human society.'

The colonists carry out with them a knowledge of agriculture and of other useful arts superior to what can grow up of its own accord in the course of many centuries among savage and barbarous nations.

They carry out with them, too, the habit of subordination, some notion of the regular government which takes place in their own country, of the system of laws which supports it, and of a regular administration of justice; and they naturally establish something of the same kind in the new settlement.<sup>11</sup>

Australia was the Enlightenment's most audacious experiment—an attempt to build a civilisation from scratch on a continent that had yet to be introduced to cultivation. Tom Roberts' *The Golden Fleece*, painted in 1894, is a record of industrial progress in a colony barely a century old. The catalogue at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where the picture hangs, describes *The Golden Fleece* as a

‘conscious and generalised heroisation of the rural worker and his evocation of Australia as a new, Arcadian land of pastoral plenty.’ It is nothing of the sort.

The shearing shed in Roberts’ picture is a highly productive processing plant supplying a globalised textile and clothing industry. It was a collaboration of ingenuity on three continents. In Britain, James Watt had re-engineered the steam engine and the Rev. Edmund Cartwright had patented the first power loom. The Factory Acts outlawing child labour gave textile mills an incentive to mechanise. By the time Roberts painted *The Golden Fleece* and that other great shearing image, *The Shearing the Rams*, the woollen mills of Yorkshire were mass producing worsted by the acre, and for which there appeared to be limitless demand. To talk of riding on the sheep’s back is to suggest we were merely passengers on the journey to resource-based prosperity, when in fact we were the drivers.

The ingenuity of George Peppin and other graziers had created the super Merino, the development that enabled Australia to corner the market for mass-produced, quality wool. The earliest South African Merinos were low-yielding sheep; in 1821, the average beast in the Camden Park flock was producing just 1.1 kg of coarse washed wool. By the end of the nineteenth century, the hardy, rugged imported animal had been turned into a prolific fibre extrusion machine. At the start of the 1890s, merinos in the Riverina district were yielding an average of 4.6 kg of wool so fine it was sold in European markets under the name of the property that produced it, akin to the French *vin d’appellation*.

The follicles of a single sheep could produce 100 million fibres a year, harvested annually by an itinerant gang, paid according to the volume of their output. Bullock trains, the B-triple trucks of their day, transported the bales to the coast, where they were loaded onto square-rigged clippers capable of reaching Great Britain via the Suez Canal in 72 days, a third of the time it had taken the First Fleet to make the journey.

Decades before the arrival of the superphosphate that transformed the soil, the Australian Merino was enriched by the ingenuity and persistence of its breeders to become the mainstay of the economy.

In the 1860s, wool was a £4 million-a-year industry. In the year The Golden Fleece was painted, wool was earning £21 million for Australia, equivalent to 11.6% of GDP.

The high cost of labour drove technological change. Shearing machines were installed from the late 1880s, designed and manufactured in Australia by Frederick Wolseley. He took 20 years to develop a flexible drive mechanism using universal joints, and his machine was put to the test at Euroka Station near Walgett. *The Argus* reported that ‘every practical man on the ground admitted the superiority of the machine over the ordinary shears.’<sup>12</sup>

Wolseley told a journalist: ‘The shearer also has an advantage of course, because he is able to shear a greater number of sheep, and, consequently, to earn a larger cheque than he could by hand; while the labour is not nearly so severe, and he is not called upon to stop work from bad wrists and so on.’ *The Argus* called it ‘the death knell ... of an old colonial order.’<sup>13</sup> Wolseley’s machine was ‘quicker than a hundred-a-day shearer ... and any man may learn to work it in a week. Chinamen and rouseabouts and blackfellows will all be shearers now ... No more tar and no more strikes; no “second cuts” spoiling samples and staples, and eight ounces more wool from every sheep.’<sup>14</sup>

Individual enterprise, not government or institutions, was the driver of innovation. The Society of Arts offered a £100 prize to find a way of preserving meat for shipment to the European market. Some 200 patents were registered. Messers Medlock and Vaily claimed that by dipping meat in their bisulphate of lime solution, ‘anything of animal origin, from a beefsteak to a bullock, from a whitebait to a whale, can be preserved sweet for months.’ The Rev. M.J. Berkley delivered a stirring address to the Society on fungi, ‘but somehow the mushroom palliative failed to impress the committee as a substitute for the roast beef of Old England.’ Professor Gamgee suggested that cattle should inhale carbonic oxide gas, at a cost of two to three shillings an animal, before being slaughtered. Dr Hassall proposed producing ‘Flour of Meat’ by drying mutton with sulphurous acid. The committee delivered a gloomy report, and the prize went unclaimed.<sup>15</sup>

In 1874, the wool trader Thomas Sutcliffe Mort established the NSW Fresh Food and Ice Company, and began building a freezing plant using ammonia compression technology at an abattoir in the Lithgow Valley, linked by rail to the plant already operating in Darling Harbour in Sydney.

The following year, he served lamb slaughtered 15 months earlier at a dinner for 300 people:

Yes, gentlemen, I now say that the time has arrived—at all events, it is not far distant—when the various portions of the earth will each give forth their products for the use of each and of all; that over-abundance in one country will make up for the deficiency of another. Science has drawn aside the veil, and invention has done the rest ...

Where the food is, the people are not; and where the people are, the food is not. It is, however, as I have just stated, within the power of man to adjust these things.<sup>16</sup>

In November 1879, the *Strathleven* sailed from Sydney to London with 40 tonnes of beef and mutton, frozen on board using dry air freezing technology patented by the Bell-Coleman Mechanical Refrigeration Company. Meat that cost between a penny and twopence a pound in Australia fetched three times as much when it reached London's Smithfield Market. A carcass of lamb was sent to Queen Victoria and a sheep to the Prince of Wales. Frozen food revolutionised the British diet. Meat consumption rose dramatically. In 1885, the average Briton consumed just 1.6 kg a year. By 1895, meat consumption had risen to 5.6 kg. By 1910, it had more than doubled to 12.7 kg.

The British farming industry, meanwhile, inefficiently run for the benefit of the aristocracy, contracted sharply with the arrival of efficiently produced produce from the New World. In 1912, James Critchell and Joseph Raymond published a triumphal history of frozen meat, recording:



The industry ... hangs on the slender piston rod of a refrigerating machine, yet feeds nations with a regularity that defies famine.<sup>17</sup>

The story of this inventive, resourceful, and enterprising spirit of progress has disappeared almost entirely from the telling of our national story. Progress has been re-invented as an endless series of moral crusades that build into a single narrative of heroic liberation. Kenneth Minogue compares it to the legend of St George taking dragons to the sword. The sword fell first on despotic kingships and religious intolerance, then slavery, prison conditions, and finally the state of the poor. In the nineteenth century, writes Minogue, ‘The sword was never still, prodding this way and that against the scaliness of privilege, vested interest or patrician interest.’

Maintaining this narrative requires that we take a dark view of the past, for to acknowledge virtue in our ancestors is to deny the glorious progress that we must assume has been made from darkness into light. The telling of one particular episode in our history—the Harvester Judgement—is an indictment of our selective national memory. The word *harvester* has become synonymous with Justice Henry Bournes Higgins’ ruling on working conditions.

The Sunshine Harvester itself—a technically advanced, efficient machine to execute the business of broad acre farming—is rarely celebrated.

The rags-to-riches story of Hugh Victor McKay, the entrepreneur behind the Sunshine Harvester, is an inspiring story. He was the fifth of 12 children, born to Irish immigrants in Victoria and raised in the Presbyterian tradition of the Free Church of Scotland. His machine stood up well against competition from the American Midwest. At its peak, McKay’s Sunshine Harvester Works employed 3,000 people and gave its name to a Melbourne suburb. The firm was the largest manufacturing exporter in the Commonwealth. McKay took a paternal interest in his workers, in the manner of the celebrated nineteenth century liberal industrialists of Great Britain, fielding cricket teams, forming the Sunshine choir, and building a fine stone church in use to this day. McKay’s achievements as Australia’s

most successful manufacturer are unlikely to be surpassed, but he is a casualty of a selective national memory.

It is no surprise that a pioneering nation should be careless about its history. This is a future-oriented society that looks forward to the golden age, not back, and it is all the healthier for that.

Yet it is vital for future national success that we recover our true national story and place it firmly in the context of the Enlightenment. Some may choose to interpret this call as the reopening of the history wars, but that is not my intent.

However, the so-called *black arm band* view of history must be challenged to ensure that as far as our human frailties allow, our telling of history fits the facts.

The first obligation of historians, as it is with journalists, is to report the simple, unvarnished truth. Facts must be presented in their proper context, for otherwise they are without meaning.

I agree with John Hirst that to tell the Australian story without reference to the European story—as the radical nationalists imply we should—is to banish our history students to the dark ages. As Hirst says, without an understanding of British and European history, the history of Australia is unintelligible.<sup>18</sup> How can students understand secular liberalism and radicalism in Australia if they do not understand the Enlightenment? How can they grasp that Australia's luck was not given, but made? And with that eternal truth planted in the minds of the next generation, can we blame them for assuming that our luck will simply continue, that our future prosperity is assured, and that the challenge of wealth is not how to earn it but how to redistribute it.

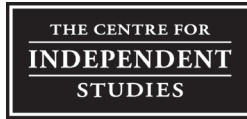
We must adopt an honest, enlightened view of history—one that sees Australia not as a dumping ground but as the Enlightenment's courageous experiment.

As debate resumes over the shape of the national curriculum with the election of a Coalition government, few issues are more vital to planning for our future than the correct telling of our past.

## Endnotes

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- 16 As above, 20.
- 17 As above, 1.
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# The Enlightenment Made Us

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Nick Cater examines the Enlightenment ideals that helped shape our uniquely Australian culture. He argues that with a focus on progress and practicality, 'the great southern continent's primitive landscape would be a laboratory for the Enlightenment's bold experiment of applied science'. Unlike America, with its pilgrim devotion to giving thanks to God first and foremost, the pragmatic early colonists of Australia got on with the job of getting on. 'The colony's first scientific institution, an observatory, was established within weeks but it was five and a half years before the first wattle-and-daub church was completed.' Cater asks whether that valuable sense of pragmatism still exists in Australia or are we in danger of losing it to political correctness.

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