

The Benefits of Openness

The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia

John Gascoigne
Cambridge University Press, 2002,
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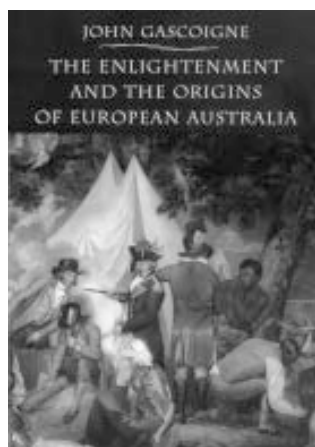
JOHN Gascoigne's *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* demonstrates that the Enlightenment and its values of reason and progress were a significant factor in the formative period of Australian history. The Enlightenment helped to shape the contours of Australian culture. When the First Fleet arrived in Australia in 1788 the Enlightenment was no longer an avant-garde or radical movement but had begun to permeate the values of European civilisation. The Enlightenment brought to Australia was not the anti-religious and often destructive variety that fed into the radicalism of the French Revolution but the moderate Enlightenment of lowland Scotland and England. From the Scottish Enlightenment came the science of man as expressed in the economics of Adam Smith, the sociology of Adam Ferguson and the philosophy and history of David Hume. From the English Enlightenment came an interest in the natural world and the desire to shape and improve that world.

This Enlightenment moulded the way the early European settlers in Australia saw themselves and their world. Gascoigne argues, correctly I think, that they had a minimal sense of their environment in Australia as being imbued with any sense of the sacred. For them it was a *'terra nullius'* waiting to be made through their efforts. Hence Gascoigne identifies 'improvement' as one of the key words in their vocabulary: the new Australian world was there to be understood and improved. It was to be classified, analysed and then made bountiful. This was not necessarily a secular view: Australia could be understood as God's handiwork to which they had been sent to improve and to make into a better place.

This ideal of improvement brought them into inevitable conflict with the indigenous inhabitants of the continent. The European settlers made an assumption that once the Aboriginal inhabitants were shown the benefits of progress and civilisation they would adopt them as a matter of course. This did not happen and the fact that it did not remained a source of deep

puzzlement for the British. Their Enlightenment values told them that they should be able to 'educate' the natives and turn them into civilised beings. The reality was that they often had no great desire to be 'civilised' in this way.

Australian nature with its weird plants and animals was a challenge to the Enlightenment values of the British but they were able to classify it and ultimately to fit it into their scheme of things. Their attempts to use the same Enlightenment values to understand the original people of Australia were much less successful. They acknowledged the shared universal nature of all human beings and attempted to explain differences through the idea that human beings passed through an evolutionary process: from hunter/gatherer to pastoralist to agriculturalist to commercial society. Why then did men on a lower stage of development not immediately seek the benefits of a higher stage of development? Gascoigne captures the nature of this dilemma beautifully and to my mind it is the highlight of the book.



It is worth recalling, however, that the Enlightenment is only one part of the cultural inheritance of Australia. Nineteenth century Catholicism, for example, took an entirely different view of the Enlightenment. The Catholic *Freeman's Journal* praised the Middle Ages and carried the flag for protection and what it termed 'fair trade'. Also the colonists often appealed to traditionalism as expressed in their Britishness. In politics the image of the British Constitution and the rights of free-born Englishmen remained very potent.

Finally there was Romanticism, the reaction against the rationality of the Enlightenment that emphasised feeling. Gascoigne rightly argues that Romanticism had a hard time in Australia because of the lack of both a sacred landscape and an organic past with which the present could be contrasted. This does not mean that Romanticism in Australia was absent, rather it took another form. Just as the representatives of Enlightenment in Australia were often Scottish, so it was a Scot, Nicol Stenhouse, who was most influential in introducing Romantic ideas into this country. Stenhouse came from a Tory background and had been involved with Thomas de Quincey, of opium fame, before coming to Sydney. The Stenhouse circle in the 1840s and 1850s developed a Romanticism of alienation built on writers such as de Quincey and Edgar Allen Poe. It was a Romanticism that found expression in the poetry of Henry Kendall and was later to emerge in the work of Christopher Brennan and his disciples down to the early James McAuley.

The other problem with placing too much emphasis on the influence of the Enlightenment in Australia is that while the Enlightenment emphasises rationality Australian culture has a very powerful streak of what is has been described by George Shaw as 'sentimental humanism'. Feeling rather than reason is often the

dominant factor in debates about public matters. There is a sentimental attachment to such things as inefficient universities, trade unions, Telstra and other archaic practices that defies commonsense and reason. The interesting question relates to the origins of this sentimental humanism. Did it develop because of the failure of Enlightenment values in the second half of the 19th century?

There is a division between rationality and feeling within Australian culture: on the one side there is science, law and economics and on the other the arts, moral self-righteousness and emotion. This division that has become greater in recent years as areas that previously favoured rationality, such as history, have increasingly succumbed to basing their approach on feelings of moral outrage. This is fortunately not true of this book. It is urbane, well written and, most importantly, increases our knowledge of the topic. It is highly recommended for anyone seeking to understand seriously Australian culture.

Reviewed by Gregory Melleuish

The Voluntary City

David T. Beito, Peter Gordon and Alexander Tabarrok (eds)
Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, and Oakland, The Independent Institute, 2002, 480pp, US\$24.95, ISBN 0472088378

THIS IS A first-rate book. I'd strongly commend it to anyone who reads *Policy*, and especially to those who don't but ought to. It would make an excellent gift for any student. It is also an important book. This is because it is subversive of some ideas that we tend to take for granted, but which this book shows to be incorrect.

What is the book about? Essentially, the non-governmental provision of all kinds of services that we make use of in an urban context, and which we typically assume that government has to provide. The book is a sampler of historically or empirically based studies of non-governmental provision, commercial and non-commercial. It discusses planning, urban infrastructure, roads, law and justice, police, health insurance and medical care, and education, and also private community associations. These latter bodies play a quasi-governmental role in the provision of services relating to housing to some 47 million Americans, typically by way of administering, privately, the common space in, and the furnishing of regulations for, condominiums and suburban residential developments.

Why is the book interesting? Largely because of the different, detailed stories that are told. Rather than trying to tell you these, let me pose some of the questions that they address. How could infrastructure be furnished to a rapidly expanding area, without government doing it? How might the private provision of infrastructure function in an urban setting? How could turnpikes be constructed privately—and even in conditions when those involved did not expect them to make a profit? Could the infrastructure needed for a manufacturing district be furnished privately? How could law and courts be provided, if not by government? How could one have the effective prosecution of criminals, if there were no police? How could welfare and medical services for the poor be provided, if the state did not do it? And surely, if government were not involved in education, a smaller percentage of children would be in school than they are today. If you read *Policy*, it is possible that you might be able to guess the overall answers to these questions. But—and this is the