Let’s Not Forget Albion

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John Gascoigne
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In the late 1950s, Honours students at Melbourne University could take Geoffrey Serle’s Australian History course only after completing John La Nauze’s full-year subject on Hanoverian and Victorian Britain (aka England). Those who questioned this restriction were informed that, since Australia was a small, derivative society, understanding its history required some knowledge of the culture, ideas and institutions exported here from Britain. While we may have discounted this rationalisation, with all the withering cynicism of late adolescence, at the time it hardly seemed worth making a fuss about.

Times change. Australian historiography, in the 1970s and 1980s, was dominated by a nativist reaction against Anglocentricity and the dreaded ‘cultural cringe’. Its more extreme manifestations rejected any comparative perspective that might blur an exclusive focus on Australia’s historical distinctiveness. But time, and academic fashion, moved on. In 1997 Alan Atkinson published the first volume of his magnum opus, which traced the origins of The Europeans in Australia ‘deep in the rich eighteenth century’, something ‘relatively new in writing about the Australian past’. Now John Gascoigne, having cut his scholarly teeth on a prize-winning intellectual history of Cambridge University (1989), followed by a biography of Sir Joseph Banks (1994) and a survey of Banks’s efforts to mobilise Science in the Service of Empire (1998), directs his formidably learned gaze to the social history of ideas in Australia from 1788 to 1850. The result is an engaging, lucid and wide-ranging overview, which triumphantly re-emphasises the intellectual benefits of integrating the study of Australia’s colonial past more closely with that of imperial Britain.

Manning Clark identified Protestantism, Catholicism and the Enlightenment as intellectual and spiritual ‘comforters’ brought to this country with the human freight of the First Fleet. Preoccupied with his own spiritual quest, Clark paid relatively little attention to what he depicted as a wholly secular, rational and utilitarian Enlightenment, despite registering its eventual triumph in a desacralised Australia. Today, however, reports of the demise of religion in this country seem exaggerated, while scholarly work over the past twenty years has demonstrated that, especially in England and Scotland, the Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was no mere synonym for agnosticism, atheism or irreligion.

Since historians only recently ceased excluding England from their accounts of what was once regarded as a largely continental phenomenon, the notion of an English Enlightenment is itself relatively novel. Yet rejection of destructive post-Reformation denominational strife, and a parallel optimism about material and social progress won through scientific enquiry and rational reform, first emerged as elite intellectual attitudes in Restoration England. From 1660 until at least the mid-nineteenth century, as Gascoigne cogently explains, religion and science were interdependent, rather than fundamentally opposed, categories (a theme further elaborated in another Australian scholar’s recent edited volume: Robert Crocker, ed., Religion, Reason and Nature in Early Modern Europe, 2001). Indeed, a major achievement of the English and Scottish established churches was to enlist science ‘in support of Christian apologetics, with the argument that God revealed Himself through both the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature’.

Having sketched an introductory account of Enlightenment attitudes, their social applications (primarily the urge for ‘improvement’) and previous approaches to both by Australian historians, Gascoigne proceeds to examine the rôle of Enlightened values in shaping the religious and political structures of colonial Australia. Religious pluralism and the separation of Church and State — whether disestablishment by design, as in South Australia, or de facto and gradual everywhere else — encouraged cooperative interaction between Enlightenment anti-clericalism and an essentially privatized Christianity. In the political realm, Enlightened attitudes helped defeat efforts to transform what one of their critics termed ‘the shoeless and illiterate squirearchy of New South Wales’ into a bunyip aristocracy, and underlay the general push for representative institutions, juries, a free press and other talismans of freeborn Englishmen. Meanwhile, systematic colonisers successfully advocated financing assisted immigration from Crown land sales, not only in Wakefieldian South Australia. With the British monarchy providing an alternative emotional focus, the emerging character of the Australian state was decidedly utilitarian: ‘Government existed not so much to provide a sense of national sentiment and identity as to provide basic services.’

The remaining chapters explore various practical manifestations of Australia’s colonial Enlightenment, expressed in efforts to ‘improve’ both the land and its inhabitants. Agricultural improvement remained a primary concern; ‘almost devoid of any ecological humility’, the colonists strove to remake the landscape in English ways, harnessing science to catalogue the continent’s natural resources...
and to facilitate their exploitation. But reaping the economic benefits also demanded an improved human nature. Education, both of children and adults (via Mechanics Institutes, public libraries, literary societies and latterly the University of Sydney), was seen, on good Lockean grounds, as a potent force of mental and moral betterment. Crime and punishment were also viewed in rational terms, following the Neapolitan theorist Cesare Beccaria and his English disciple Jeremy Bentham, as interpreted by reformist penal administrators, notably Sir John Franklin in Tasmania and Alexander Maconochie on Norfolk Island. Gascoigne finally turns to Enlightened racial discourse, which, by emphasising the essential unity of humankind, complemented Christian doctrines of spiritual equality, and thus at least partly offset popular denigration of the Aborigines. From the mid-nineteenth century, however, discriminatory attitudes were increasingly buttressed by phrenology and other forms of biological racism, which denied the possibility that the indigenous peoples were capable of ‘improvement’.

Given his stated chronological limits, Gascoigne’s concentration on New South Wales is hard to fault, especially since he frequently draws illustrative examples and well-chosen quotations from other Australian settlements. Victorians might nevertheless find their capital (still, admittedly, pre-‘Marvellous’) somewhat slighted by comparison with its older rival.

No one could complain about the illuminating international comparisons, sensitivity to issues of gender and race, or remarkably eclectic range of source material that Gascoigne deploys to illustrate his splendidly diverse assortment of topics, despite regrettably scanty coverage of medicine, nursing, non-criminal law, charity, philanthropy and social welfare in general. Some criticism might be directed at the study’s rather elastic conceptualisation, whereby the categories of science, an undifferentiated Enlightenment, improvement, progress and utilitarianism tend at times to blur, as does periodisation. The nominal 1850 cut-off date is frequently disregarded, and there seems little good reason why what might be considered in some respects an Australian counterpart to Asa Briggs’s modern English history classic The Age of Improvement 1783–1867 should terminate early in the second decade of Queen Victoria’s long reign.

Indeed, Gascoigne’s Conclusion suggests that Australia remains in the Enlightenment’s grip today, as the left seeks social betterment through well-planned actions and institutions fostered by a benevolent state, while the right places its trust in Adam Smith’s invisible hand and economic growth. If so, it remains to be seen whether the Enlightenment’s early, late, conservative, moderate, radical or even utopian strains will predominate in the twenty-first century. Whatever the outcome, this is an indispensable and highly readable guide to the formative years.