

1 | INTRODUCTION

UNDERSTANDING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Civilisations like to create monuments in stone but what sustains and shapes them are edifices of the mind — beliefs and sets of ideas which determine their view of the proper ordering of things whether of society or of the universe at large. In most times and places such controlling artifices of the mind have been expressed in mythological or religious languages. And, for those in the First Fleet — both convicts and guards — when they came ashore at Botany Bay in January 1788, the most obvious way to express what their society stood for was by recourse to religious language. Protestant Britain might have dispatched them unceremoniously forth but it still shaped their lives in this distant place. For the chiefly Irish Catholics the hand of Protestant England was no less obvious, as they defined themselves in opposition to it.

Religion had the advantage of being a long-entrenched form of discourse which could be expressed at many different levels both intellectually and socially — even at those which had some meaning in convict society, if only as a source of sectarian labels. It also had the advantage of having a large institutional backing which, in the case of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, formed part of the apparatus of the state. But both overlapping and, on occasions, in tension with such religious beliefs, which were the most obvious and manifest expression of the ideological mortar of late eighteenth-century British society, was a set of ideas known as ‘the Enlightenment’.

In the late eighteenth century it formed the most obvious rival to Christianity in providing an articulate and connected understanding of human beings and their place in the universe. As an attitude of mind rather than a formal creed with clearly-defined articles the Enlightenment resists ready definition. But like the Renaissance, another label to which historians are ineluctably drawn (though they might quarrel about its nature and extent), it can be known by its fruits — developments which changed the character of Western civilisation. Since ancient times European society — like most societies — had been dominated by a quest for order and stability and, generally, had looked to the church to provide these. But a civilisation based on religious sanctions had failed spectacularly to provide either order or stability in the seventeenth century in the face of the catastrophic wars unleashed by the Reformation.

The basic impetus to the currents of thought to which historians, drawing on contemporary self-description, give the name ‘Enlightenment’ was the quest for systems of

2 The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia

thought which might provide a secure basis for political and social order in an age when sectarian conflict had made the traditional religious sanctions dangerously divisive.¹ Hence the quest for principles which transcended the confessional divide and which were secular (though not necessarily anti-religious) in character: the appeal to reason, the language of rights, and a growing insistence on toleration.

Religious discord also strengthened the growing power of the state as it increasingly intruded into areas such as education or social services which had once been the province of the church. One of the foci around which the theorising of the Enlightenment was centred was the need to give theoretical form to the power of the state. Many of the *philosophes* — the thinkers of the Enlightenment — were concerned to ensure that the state did not acquire too much power. However, this could be counter-balanced by an urgent quest for change and reform in the face of traditional obstacles which only the state had the power to cut through.

In seeking an intellectual foundation for a more secularised understanding of politics and society the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment naturally looked to another major development of the seventeenth century, the Scientific Revolution. For it was during that century that the full implications of Copernicus's hypothesis — that the sun rather than the earth was at the centre of the cosmos — were worked through. Tycho Brahe, Johann Kepler and Galileo Galilei provided the astronomical evidence to undermine the traditional fundamental distinction between the heavenly superlunary and the earthly sublunar spheres, while Galileo developed the outlines of a new system of physics to replace Aristotelianism — which, for so long, had been intertwined with the pre-Copernican Ptolemaic universe. These developments were eventually drawn into a mighty synthesis in Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687) which demonstrated that the whole of the universe, both the earth and the heavens, could be explained in mathematical terms by one set of uniform laws. In medicine the patient empirical enquiries of William Harvey led to the downfall of the traditional Galenic system of physiology and its replacement by one dominated by Harvey's ideas of the circulation of the blood.

Such developments provided much of the intellectual self-confidence which fuelled the eighteenth-century Enlightenment enterprise. The accomplishments of the Scientific Revolution and, above all, those of Newton seemed to provide proof positive of the capabilities of the human mind. Such milestones of human achievement established what appeared to be a royal road to truth based on the methods of first-hand empirical observation, experimentation and the use, wherever possible, of quantitative techniques. The choice of the phrase '*Nullius in verba*' ('On the word of no-one') as the motto of the Royal Society, Britain's premier scientific body, when it was established in 1660 conveys this intellectual self-confidence based on the rejection of traditional authority and the embrace of the methods of the experimental sciences. No longer was the text of Aristotle the supreme authority and it did not take long before others questioned the most basic text of all, the Bible.

And yet the Royal Society was bedecked with bishops and most scientists continued to regard their work as illuminating the nature of God as revealed through Creation. In many ways the Scientific Revolution grew out of a tradition of philosophising that had been nurtured in the universities which had been created by the church — even though many of

Introduction

3

those associated with the Scientific Revolution came to regard the intellectual fare offered by the universities as dry and unprofitable. From its beginnings, then, the Enlightenment had an ambivalent attitude to religion. Religion clashed with Enlightenment conceptions of the basis of intellectual authority but it could be accommodated if it did not interfere with or, better still, itself adopted the methods employed by the *philosophes*. Religion was associated with division but it was tolerated if it widened its doctrinal boundaries to diminish the sources of such division. Most basically of all the churches could form a useful part of society so long as they did not get in the way of the state and its quest to order society in more rational ways by eliminating the debris of past ages.

In the early eighteenth century those who thought in the generally secularising terms of the Enlightenment were a relatively small and sometimes embattled minority but, by the middle of the century, the influence of the *philosophes* was becoming more and more evident. The need to manage ever-growing state bureaucracies and to justify their actions in the face of the custodians of tradition, whether clergy, aristocrats, guildsmen or universities, meant an increasing demand for the writings of the *philosophes*. For their most valuable contribution from the viewpoint of an expanding state structure was the ability to advocate the virtues of change and to counter the voice of those who resisted a departure from traditional ways.²

Linked to this break with tradition was the *philosophes'* capacity to deal with the messiness of the accumulated practices of past ages by providing systems of classification based on empirical evidence. In the realm of the study of nature, the orderly mind of the Enlightenment naturally meshed with the new systems of classification, of which the best known was that of Linnaeus. In the realm of human affairs the same instinct for order and system found expression in the increasing desire for such basic tools of rational government as censuses, accurate maps and, not least, systems of taxation which often eroded the tangle of privilege which had built up over the centuries.

Classification of the variants of social forms and human characteristics was linked in turn to one of the central ambitions of the Enlightenment: to create a 'Science of Man' in the way in which the Scientific Revolution had created a science of nature. By doing so it was hoped that it would be possible to unlock the sources of greater liberty and prosperity. Through a better understanding of human behaviour it was hoped, too, that it might be possible to remove and rectify human failings. Optimistically, the Enlightenment generally attributed such human shortcomings not so much to flaws within humanity itself (as Christianity had long done) but, rather, to distortions caused by society. Hence the confidence that it was possible to put humanity at least on the path to perfection by creating new institutions — whether prisons, schools or lunatic asylums — which would remould human nature into more acceptable forms.

Just as believers need a church to share their beliefs with others of like mind so, too, the Enlightenment was a gregarious movement which needed to encourage the like-minded to gather together in institutions which both affirmed and promoted their way of thinking. The coffee-shop was one such place, the salon another, but perhaps most important were institutions specifically devoted to advancing the Enlightenment cause through the promotion of science or social improvement — institutions such as the many scientific academies that were founded throughout Europe in the late seventeenth and eighteenth

4 The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia

centuries, both in the capitals and in major provincial centres. For many, contact with scientific methods of improvement through the collection of data and experiment came through membership of the many organisations established to promote particular goals such as better agriculture or, to a lesser extent, new methods of manufacture. Others absorbed Enlightenment culture through membership of the Masonic lodges which provided in ritual form an alternative system of belief to that offered by the churches. Such societies provided what Jacob calls ‘the private zone of civil society’,³ which was a natural training ground for active citizenship.

The extent to which such societies were open to women as well as men varied markedly. Masonic lodges were uniformly male, as were most scientific and agricultural societies. In France the salons were more open to women than were most learned assemblies in Britain and indeed often took their tone from their female patrons. Australia inherited a British club tradition which generally did not encourage female members. Nonetheless, educated women did form part of the clientele of Enlightenment authors with books such as Francesco Algarotti’s *Newtonianism for Ladies* (1737) or Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Letters on the Elements of Botany Addressed to a Lady* (1771). And there were also some examples of women themselves contributing to the body of enlightened writing, such as Madame du Châtelet’s scientific writings and translation of Newton’s *Principia* (1759) and Catherine Macaulay’s *History of England* (1763–83). Enlightenment theorists recognised the extent to which the progress of civilisation was linked to the extent to which women were able to participate actively in society and to curb masculine aggression. In his *History of Women* (1782) William Alexander, the Scottish physician, advanced the view that ‘it is not therefore arts, sciences, and learning, but the company of the other sex, that forms the manners and that renders the man agreeable’.⁴ As a movement which directly challenged many aspects of traditional practice, the Enlightenment set considerable store by the need to promote greater equality between the sexes and the role of women as educators of the next generation made them important as potential agents for change.

For education provided the main vehicle for the promotion of Enlightenment attitudes. Hence it was an area in which there was frequent conflict with the church, long the primary custodian of the schools and universities. Conflict with the church was part of a more generalised conflict between Enlightenment attitudes and the forces of tradition. The Enlightenment both shaped and was shaped by the momentous changes that were to transform the economy and society of Europe from the late eighteenth century. These were most evident in Britain with its Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions but, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Europe, too, it was becoming apparent that it was possible to produce great prosperity — albeit at the price of an erosion of traditional practice.

Part of the growing self-confidence of Enlightenment thinkers in the second half of the eighteenth century derives from the extent to which they saw themselves as in the vanguard of the change which, increasingly, was enlisting the support of the privileged elites who governed society. Such confidence is reflected in the comment of the late eighteenth-century English clerical economist, Josiah Tucker, that ‘No man can pretend to set Bounds to the Progress that may yet be made in Agriculture and Manufacture ... is it not much more natural and reasonable to suppose, that we are rather at the Beginning only, and just got within the Threshold, than that we are arrivd at the *ne plus ultra* of useful Discoveries’.⁵

Introduction

5

The Enlightenment, then, stood for a more efficient orderly society that would bring greater prosperity — goals which might endear it to some sections of the elite but which were often at variance with much of the population still strongly attached to their customary ways. But, together with a natural alliance with an increasingly centralising state, went an ambivalence about the powers of government. The devastation caused by absolute monarchs (particularly in France) and their quest for military glory made the *philosophes* wary of granting too much power to one individual. In any case, monarchical government was, by its nature, too bound up with traditional attitudes and practices to be a secure platform for constructing a truly enlightened society.

The solution that the British and their French admirers adopted was to develop political forms based on limiting the power of the monarchy. In his enormously influential *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu drew on British practice to outline an ideal constitution which left a considerable role for his own class, the aristocracy. However, such claims were increasingly dismissed in the second part of the century as the self-interested behaviour of the aristocracy made them less and less plausible patrons of Enlightenment. Nonetheless, Montesquieu's analysis of political power left a lasting mark in his emphasis on the need to limit centralised authority through the division of the executive, legislative and judicial powers.

If the aristocracy was too immersed in tradition and self-interest to act as a bulwark of liberty, where was such protection to come from? As the century wore on Enlightenment thinking increasingly emphasised the importance of universal rights which reflected the universal laws which the Scientific Revolution had demonstrated at work in nature. Like nature, so, too, society was based on underlying laws which provided stability and order. The task of the *philosophe* was to reveal such laws and to remove impediments to proper functioning. For Adam Smith, for example, such laws reflected the will of the Deistic hidden hand which ensured that the sum total of the actions of many different individuals with their own self-interested motives would produce universal prosperity. The main obstacle to this prosperity was the intrusion by government or self-interested cabals in the free working of the market. Such laws should apply to society as a whole, just as Newton's laws applied to the universe as a whole without any separation between the heavens and the earth. It followed, then, that systems of law or custom based on ancient privileges which treated different sections of the population in different ways should be abolished or, at least, reformed.

This did not necessarily mean democracy — for after all many of the Enlightenment writers were the beneficiaries of privilege — but it did mean equality before the law. As early as 1690 John Locke in his *Two Treatises on Government* had proclaimed the ideal — which to his mind was quite consistent with a largely oligarchic social and political order — that there should be 'establish'd laws, not to be varied in particular Cases, but to have one Rule of Rich and Poor, for the Favourite at Court, and the Country Man at Plough'.⁶ Such views help to explain why the *philosophes* paid particular attention to the reform and simplification of the law.

Out of such universalising modes of thought developed notions of human rights — that there were fundamental social laws and that these should be reflected in the way that all individuals were treated. Such rights undermined the hold of many traditional institutions by

6 The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia

asserting the need for the state to treat all citizens in the same way (even when it came to paying taxes), despite the demands of privileged orders. Rights language could be used to promote change and modernisation. But, when combined with the national emergencies that culminated in the American and French Revolutions, they could become a dangerous ideological tool in justifying the need not simply for reform but for revolution.

There were, then, many Enlightenments reflecting different places and different phases of the century. For the *philosophes* moved from an embattled minority to a position of increasing influence by the mid-eighteenth century and, eventually, to a divided band as some threw in their lot with the forces of revolution at the century's end and others continued to seek change and reform through the established order. What bound the different expressions of the Enlightenment together was a firm belief that human problems could be solved by the application of analysis and experiment in the same way that the Scientific Revolution had unravelled the secrets of nature and a confidence that society was improving and could be made to improve still further.⁷ Such a confidence in the power of human thought and the possibilities of progress is conveyed by the boast of Bentham — a person much quoted in colonial Australia — that: 'I have formed a plan of universal conquest. I intend to govern all the nations in the habitable globe after my death — With what weapons? With rhetoric? With fine speeches? With prohibitive and irritant clauses? — No: but with reasons, with a chain of ... articulate and connected reasons, all depending on one principle.'⁸

By the end of the century an approach to the problems of government and society which drew on Enlightenment thinking had become so deeply engrained in the attitudes of the elite that it was a natural export when the British government came to establish the penal colony of Botany Bay. And the extent to which it coloured the thinking of those who constructed this new settlement meant that the Enlightenment was to form a central core of the mental world of what eventually became the Australian nation.

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING ENLIGHTENMENTS

The Enlightenment, then, tended to be critical of traditional religious justifications for political and social institutions but was not necessarily completely dismissive of religion as such. For, although the relations between the Enlightenment and Christianity often took the form of conflict, there were also ways in which the two could complement each other — both, for example, in different ways, served to promote concepts of individual human dignity and both were associated with traditions of rational inquiry. Indeed what is striking about the Enlightenment in its English-speaking and, more particularly, Australian guise is the extent to which the impulses of the Enlightenment and Christianity could coalesce.

This is particularly true of Evangelicalism — the most dynamic form of Christianity which helped shape early colonial Australia. As Hilton's *The age of atonement* has shown, the Evangelicals, like Bentham's Enlightenment disciples, the Utilitarians, believed in order, discipline and the need to defer immediate gratification for future good. The fact that for the Evangelicals this future good ultimately lay in the next world, in contrast to the Utilitarians' this-worldly outlook, did not alter the fact that they often shared a similar approach to problems. Within Australia this was to become evident in the extent to which the impulses

Introduction

7

of Christianity and the Enlightenment often merged in their approach to problems such as education or criminology.⁹ Both in their different ways could subscribe to the basic tenet that the world could be improved and human beings made better as the result of conscious human planning and disciplined endeavour.

The challenge to the traditional order associated with such a set of ideas based fundamentally on a belief in the possibilities of progress was linked to deeper changes in old regime society over the course of the eighteenth century and particularly around the period when the distant penal settlement of Botany Bay was established. For though the founding of this remote colony was but a minor event in the larger European scale of things, it came at a nodal point in European history. The late eighteenth century was an age which experienced two political revolutions, the American and the French, which undermined many of the assumptions on which society had for so long been based by challenging the notion of a political and social order based on hereditary privilege and sanctioned by an established church. At around the same time, Britain began to go down the path of the Industrial Revolution which in the longer term was to reshape the whole tenor of a society based for so long on agriculture and handicrafts and on the assumptions that such an economy bred: that the possibility of change was uncertain, provisional and, carried too far, even dangerous and that security lay in the accustomed ways of one's forebears.

The remarkable achievement of British society was to contain such rapid change in the traditional — albeit modified — structures of a society based around the power of a land-owning class. This had its reflection in the way in which the Enlightenment, in its English-speaking guise, took a more moderate form than the more adversarial, and therefore more conspicuous, French Enlightenment.¹⁰ In England, Scotland and America the Enlightenment impulses were more likely to be associated with the reform or revitalisation of institutions than with their eradication.

It was this more moderate, and generally more conserving, form of the Enlightenment which chiefly influenced the attitudes of those who founded the infant colony of New South Wales. Such a mentality helped to give the irksome, and even brutal, business of bringing the Australian continent firmly under the sway of British colonial rule something of the character of a civilising mission. As that product of the Scottish Enlightenment, the urbane clergyman Sydney Smith, put it in his review of Collins's *Account of the English colony of New South Wales*: 'To introduce an European population, and consequently the arts and civilisation of Europe, into such an untrodden country as New Holland, is to confer a lasting and important benefit upon the world'.¹¹

Moreover, in the context of a settler society such as Australia, with no long-established institutions standing in the way of the diffusion of enlightened values, the spread of the Enlightenment could be particularly pervasive — and often unnoticed — because it generated less conflict than in the Old World. In this respect, as in others, there is an interesting parallel between Australia and the United States, another society with deep eighteenth-century roots. 'But in America', writes Commager — in a work, the thesis of which is proclaimed in its title, *The empire of reason: how Europe imagined and America realized the Enlightenment* — 'where there were no ancient tyrannies to overthrow, no barriers of tradition or poverty or ignorance to surmount, and few iniquities — except the prodigious iniquity of slavery — to

8 The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia

banish, the *philosophes* could devote their energies to realizing the program of the Enlightenment'.¹²

As American historians have shown at length, it was out of such an Enlightenment-generated matrix of ideas that the justifications for the break with the authority of the British Crown largely emerged, so that Enlightenment ideology has left a deep imprint on American political and civic life. As Bailyn writes: 'American nationality was forged in an eighteenth century, enlightenment revolution'.¹³ Gay actually concludes his massive two-volume study of the Enlightenment with a section on the infant United States republic entitled 'The program of the Enlightenment in practice'.¹⁴

Moreover, the American experience of settlement/intrusion shaped the views of Enlightenment theorists about the course of human development. For Locke, North America was a paradigmatic case in explaining the emergence of political institutions. As he viewed it, settlement on virgin land led to improvement which generated the demand for protection of property and hence the emergence of political institutions whereby individuals gave up some liberties in return for the benefits which civil society gave. Hence the claim that 'in the beginning all the World was America'.¹⁵

Such a view of society took it for granted that unimproved land was *terra nullius* — land of no-one — until, as Locke put it, someone 'removes [it] out of the State that Nature hath provided...[and] hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*'.¹⁶ Such an assumption was to form part of the mental furniture of the founders of New South Wales. Indeed, these very words of Locke were quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1839 in defence of the European conquest of the land.¹⁷ So, too, did those directing this penal colony, largely populated by convicted thieves also accept as a given Locke's central thesis — which he invoked the American case to demonstrate — that political power and property were closely intertwined. As Locke famously put it, the 'great and *chief end* ... of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting of themselves under Government, is the *Preservation of their Property*. To which in the state of Nature there are many things wanting'.¹⁸

The parallels between the infant Australia and the United States were ones on which the early colonists often reflected. As early as 1791 the 'Scottish martyr', the political prisoner, the Reverend Thomas Palmer, remarked that the ample possibilities of Australia meant that it 'wants only virtue and liberty to be another America'¹⁹ — a clear reference to the Enlightenment-inspired principles of the American Revolution. But a conservative like James Macarthur could also appeal approvingly to the parallels between the two offshoots of British culture. In his *New South Wales; Present State and Future Prospects* (1837), Macarthur contended that 'the two continents seem undoubtedly to have been reserved by Providence, as fields in which the energies of the British character, operating upon essentially different materials, were destined to spread over the uncultured regions of primeval nature, the triumph of peace, and the empire of civilization'.²⁰ In short, both Australia and the United States were to act as agents of Enlightenment in its British and particularly English guise — one that took a more moderate form than the more adversarial, and therefore more conspicuous, French Enlightenment. In 1839 a South Australian periodical even went so far as to suggest that the 'Anglo-Australians' would exert a much more extensive and beneficial

influence on the progress of civilization than the 'Anglo-Americans' because of the absence of slavery in Australia.²¹

But the radical and threatening overtones of the American Revolution lingered and, for some, the Enlightenment heritage of the United States with its republicanism and opposition to established churches could work as a corrosive influence within colonial Australia. After the first general election of the South Australian Legislative Council in 1851, Bishop Short, the Anglican bishop of Adelaide, regretfully concluded that the British traditions of Crown and Altar were under threat since the majority of the council's members 'have been returned by a party ultra-republican in Religion and Politics ... who seek to assimilate this Colony in habits and notions to the United States'.²²

The distinctive character of the American Enlightenment illustrates again the point that the set of ideas which the term 'the Enlightenment' seeks to describe was capable of taking different forms in different situations — a point emphasised by a work such as *The Enlightenment in national context*²³ with its survey of the various colouring that Enlightenment impulses could take on in the different regions of Europe. And in Australia, as elsewhere, local circumstances meant that some aspects of Enlightenment ideology received greater emphasis than others.

For the aspiring gentry of New South Wales and Tasmania, as for the landed classes of Britain, the appeal to reason and order could be used as a way of justifying a social system based on hierarchy. Thus the pursuit of such Enlightenment goals as the advancement of the natural sciences could — as it did in Britain²⁴ — act as a badge of social position. Interest in such cultural pursuits, no less than Georgian architecture, acted as an entrée to genteel society emphasising the divide between those who saw themselves as the agents of civilisation and the masses still struggling to establish themselves in a strange and savage land. For those who resisted the entrenching of an established church in the new colonies, the anti-clerical impulses of the Enlightenment had some appeal. These, however, were tempered by the fact that the most vigorous opponents of an established church were Protestant dissenters, wary of the anti-religious overtones of Enlightenment ideology.

IMPROVEMENT AND PROGRESS

One common theme, however, which appealed to most of the Europeans who established the colonies which grew into Australia was a belief that the continent which they had taken as their own could be moulded to meet their needs; that for all the strangeness and harshness of the landscape it was amenable to improvement. The view that society could be improved through the application of reason and industry gave direction to the new settlements and linked their endeavours with the faith in progress that was a keynote of the Enlightenment.

The concept of improvement had developed out of the experience of agricultural modernisation in eighteenth-century Britain and, thanks to the techniques associated with the Agrarian Revolution, the production of food reached hitherto undreamed-of levels. Along with the new species of flora and fauna which were unloaded from ships and which transformed, both for good and ill, the ancient continent of Australia these fragile wooden vessels also brought with them a faith in the possibilities of improvement: the hope that the

same techniques that in Britain had largely eliminated the long-familiar spectre of dearth could be applied in this new and distant setting and achieve similar goals.

But the price of improvement was an Enlightenment-tinctured willingness to break with tradition where necessary and to embrace the new — a point emphasised by Watkin Tench in his account of the voyage of the First Fleet to Botany Bay. Reacting against what he considered the religiously and politically obscurantist character of Brazil, he observed that in that country ‘the progress of improvement appears slow, and fettered by obstacles almost insurmountable, whose baneful influence will continue, until a more enlightened system of policy shall be adopted’.²⁵

For faith in improvement — whether in agriculture, education or society more generally — reflected a more fundamental belief in that key Enlightenment precept: the possibilities of progress. When, in his *Letter from Sydney* (1829), Edward Wakefield promoted his plans for the better utilisation of the ‘waste land’ of Australia and the possibilities that lay ahead, if ‘with the increase of immigration ... all the land shall be appropriated and cultivated’, he linked it to a more general vision of progress. Thus he appealed ‘to those who believe that mankind is in a state of progressive improvement’.²⁶

Progress meant a willingness to accept change for future advantage and a confidence that the application of reason would ultimately mean a better world. It was a perspective of the world which did much to sustain the infant Australian colonies through their early trials and helps to account for the remarkable vigour they displayed. As Charles Darwin remarked when he called in at Sydney in 1836 during the voyage of the *Beagle* (along with some rather less flattering remarks about the colony of New South Wales): ‘Here, in a less promising country, scores of years have done many times more than an equal number of centuries have effected in South America’.²⁷ It was a judgement which had earlier been delivered by a more impartial judge, the French explorer, Hyacinthe de Bougainville (son of his famous namesake), who, after he visited Sydney in 1825, remarked to the French minister for the navy that the laws and the institutions the English had put in place had ‘produced such excellent results in so few years’. He even went so far as to suggest that the French might learn something from studying the English example and, when reporting on the new Sydney’s meagre defences, he urged that it would be a crime against civilisation to destroy it since it was ‘the masterwork of the colonising spirit’.²⁸

The ideal of improvement transmitted a belief in the possibilities of progress into the fabric of everyday life, making it more than a speculative system of philosophy. In the voluminous printed literature dealing with agriculture in the setting of colonial Australia, the concept of improvement occurs again and again. It was possible, the writers urged, to produce better sheep or wheat or grapes or whatever, if farmers were willing to apply rational principles to agriculture, to learn by trial and error and not simply rely on traditional methods which in England, and still more in Australia, could act as an obstacle to progress and prosperity. As one writer on Australian colonisation put it in 1843, ‘improvements in farming’ meant changing ‘the system of management handed down to them [farmers] from their ancestors’.²⁹ The language of agricultural improvement, for many, provided the most concrete illustration of the ways in which Enlightenment-based attitudes to reason and science could have practical and beneficial implications for the advancement of society.