THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE ORIGINS OF EUROPEAN AUSTRALIA

The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia surveys some of the key intellectual influences in the formation of Australian society by emphasising the impact of the Enlightenment with its commitment to rational enquiry and progress, attitudes which owed much to the successes of the Scientific Revolution. The first part of the book analyses the political and religious background of the period from the First Fleet (1788) to the mid-nineteenth century. The second demonstrates the pervasiveness of ideas of improvement – a form of the idea of progress – which originally largely derived from agriculture but were to shape attitudes to human nature in fields as diverse as education, penal discipline and race relations. Throughout, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* highlights the extent to which developments in Australia can be compared and contrasted with those in Britain and the USA.

John Gascoigne is Associate Professor, School of History, University of New South Wales, Sydney, and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. He is the author of *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment* (1989), *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment* (1994) and *Science in the Service of Empire* (1998).

For Catherine

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE ORIGINS OF EUROPEAN AUSTRALIA

John Gascoigne
with the assistance of Patricia Curthoys

University of New South Wales

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

© John Gascoigne 2002

First published 2002
This digitally printed first paperback version 2005

CONTENTS

v

Contents

ILLUSTRATIONS

ABBREVIATIONS

Add.	Additional Manuscripts
AJCP	Australian Joint Copying Project
AJPH	*Australian Journal of Politics and History*
BL	British Library
FRS	Fellow of the Royal Society
HRA	*Historical Records of Australia*
HRAS	*Historical Records of Australian Science*
HRNSW	*Historical Records of New South Wales*
HS	*Historical Studies*
JAS	*Journal of Australian Studies*
JRAHS	*Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*
JRH	*Journal of Religious History*
ML	Mitchell Library
NLS	National Library of Scotland
PRO	Public Record Office
RAHS, J&P	*Royal Australian Historical Society, Journal and Proceedings*
SPRI	Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge
THRA, P&P	*Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

St Matthew's Church, Windsor – Australia's oldest consecrated Anglican church[1] – stands as an architectural embodiment of the ideals of the Europeans who took possession of the Australian continent in the decades following the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. Rationality and religion merge in a Georgian style which left no room for Gothic gloom or a vaulted ceiling aspiring to an ineffable transcendence. Originally, clear glass let in a sunshine uncomplicated by the colours and meanings of ecclesiastical stained glass. All, as far as possible, was geometrically ordered with straight lines and a clear outline and little architectural or theological ambiguity.
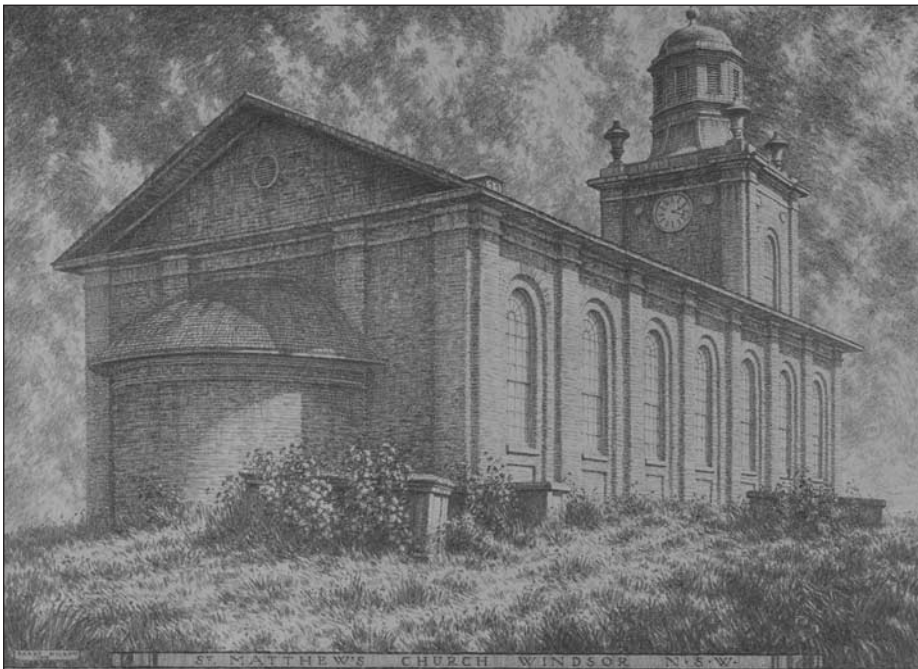
St Matthew's Church, Windsor (*reproduced in Hardy Wilson,* Old colonial Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania, *Sydney: the Author, 1924, Plate IX*). *By permission of the National Library of Australia.*

A lightning rod proclaimed a belief that it was licit to use science to protect the house of Lord, in contrast to the urgings of some devout eighteenth-century clerics who viewed such devices as an interference with the will of Providence. A late nineteenth-century addition of stars over the altar prompted by the Government Astronomer, John Tebbutt, serves as a reminder of the continuing belief in the consonance of religion and science – the one to reveal God's purposes through the Book of Scripture, the other through the Book of Nature.

It was a church designed for the religion of the word with the ritual aspects of religion kept in check – originally the importance of the preacher was ostentatiously proclaimed by a mighty three-decker pulpit. The role of religion as a custodian of public morality was evident in the conspicuous display of the ten commandments at the front of the church and the GR (Georgius Rex) erected over the doorway by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1820 was a reminder of the traditional links between Throne and Altar.

When Macquarie laid the foundation stone in 1817 the church stood at the furthest point at which it was possible to travel inland by water from Sydney. Its location at the end of this waterway up the Hawkesbury River stood as a proclamation that the wilderness would be tamed. The town of Windsor, of which St Matthew's formed a natural focus, was itself one of the towns planned by Macquarie in an effort to soften and civilise a penal settlement by enlightened state patronage. Macquarie would have learned in his native Scotland how architecture and town planning could promote civic virtue, as it had in Edinburgh thanks to the well-ordered construction of the New Town.

The church was not, however, consecrated until 1822, a year after he was recalled to England – in part because of British government disapproval of the cost of his ambitious building programme. The ceremony was performed by Macquarie's enemy, Samuel Marsden, who, as the colony's Principal Chaplain, officiated in the absence of the customary bishop. For Marsden, Windsor provided a fair field for the cultivation and improvement of the sheep which were to be the colony's economic salvation. His detractors claimed that the pugnacious Evangelical clergyman took the biblical injunction to 'feed my sheep' rather too literally, neglecting his pastoral duties towards his convict flock the better to promote his other pastoral interests. The New Zealand greenstone on his monument in the church witnesses, however, to his energetic promotion of a mission to the Maoris.

The church on its slight rise surrounded by fertile green fields and, by Australian standards, a deep river must have seemed like a little piece of Britain transplanted to the Antipodes. Such a resemblance was heightened by the name Green Hills, which was first used to describe the area, and by the town's eventual title of Windsor, which conjured up images of the Thames. It was easy to overlook the circumstances that accompanied the coming of the Europeans, the dispossession of the Darug people from their traditional hunting and fishing grounds along the Hawkesbury, breaking the economic and spiritual basis of a way of life still commemorated by the rock art along the river. The continuing struggle for European control of the Hawkesbury was reflected in Governor King's report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1804 that three tribesmen from the Hawkesbury lamented that they were being 'driven from the few places that were left on the banks of the river, where alone they could procure food'.[2]

It was not so easy to forget the convicts whose unfree labour made the settlement possible. The church's design was the work of a convict architect, Francis Greenway, whose socially useful endeavours provided a conspicuous example of the way in which the convict system could redeem as well as punish. Less edifying was the behaviour of the highly anonymous

thief or thieves who stole the rim of a Spanish dollar which Macquarie laid behind the foundation stone. When the stone was found to be so disturbed within a few hours of the ceremony, it was relaid and another dollar was re-deposited – only to be stolen a few days later.[3]

The civilisation that St Matthew's embodied was one that drew much of its self-confidence and dynamism from a fundamental belief that it was in the vanguard of human history – that it had tapped into the well-springs that made progress possible. For the thin elite which ruled the destinies of that oligarchic society, part of this confidence came from the achievements of science which, for the British particularly, had been incarnated in the life and work of Isaac Newton. The epitaph written by the poet, Alexander Pope, for Newton captured the sense of science as an ally of Enlightenment through the metaphor of light – appropriately so, since Newton's early work had dealt with optics, most notably through his demonstration that white light was made up of the colours of the rainbow:

> Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night
> God said, *Let Newton be!* and all was *Light*.[4]

In a more direct way Georgian Britain's belief in progress was shaped by what its governing landed classes saw before them in their fields. Thanks to the techniques of agricultural improvement, more food than ever before was being produced, banishing the centuries-old spectre of dearth. It was an achievement that Windsor's farmers sought to emulate and, indeed, without the food supplies produced on the fertile floodplains of the Hawkesbury River, the early colony might have been abandoned. Marsden's success in sheep-breeding was also a reminder of the wealth that could accumulate from the practice of improvement. Both in Britain and Australia the successes in agriculture provided the momentum for the belief that improvement was possible in all sectors of society, including the improvement of humanity's moral and social behaviour.

It is the object of this book to trace the way in which European Australia's early origins were shaped by such a mentality – one that drew on the Enlightenment, with its conviction that human reason could unravel the problems of society and politics as it had the workings of the natural world. Such a mentality brought with it a willingness to question tradition and a belief in the possibilities of progress, as embodied in the practice of improvement. Australia's foundation in 1788, in the interval between the American and French Revolutions, helped to ensure that the ideological mortar with which the early colony had to be constructed included some of the concepts that were embodied in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen: ideas of universal human rights, governments answerable to the people, separation of church and state and a belief that traditional institutions, such as an aristocracy, had to be weighed against the demands of social utility. The need, from a European standpoint, rapidly to transform what the colonists regarded as the waste-lands of Australia into farming and grazing land further strengthened a belief in the benefits of improvement and, with it, a confidence in progress. Improvement was accompanied by an emphasis on the practical and the useful that made Australia fertile ground for the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and his disciples, the Utilitarians. Their belief in the need for social order and discipline was confirmed by Christianity and, in particular, by Evangelicalism – the most dynamic form of Protestantism in the period when European Australia took shape.

Indeed, in Australia, such influences were to be less challenged in the nineteenth century than in Europe, where the reaction against the French Revolution helped to fuel the Romantic Revival. Romanticism drew on a sense of tradition which was given force by the tangible remnants of the past that in Europe lay on all sides. But for European Australians, ignorant or contemptuous of the long Aboriginal past, theirs was an entirely new land with nothing to mark past ages. As a consequence the late-eighteenth-century impulses of the Enlightenment took a particularly secure hold in Australia[5] – one of the reasons why this book continues up to the mid-nineteenth century. The strong tradition of action on the part of the state from convict times onwards further heightened the impact of Utilitarianism which, in both Australia and Britain, naturally allied itself with the state. The focus of this study is, then, from first European settlement in 1788 to around 1850 – the terminal date reflecting the major changes that occurred around the middle of the century: the granting in 1850 of a wider franchise which led, in 1856, to responsible self-government; the founding in the same year of Australia's first university, the University of Sydney; and, of course, the upheavals that followed the discovery of gold in 1851.

*

Like my previous two volumes on Joseph Banks, the text of the book has benefited from the careful attention of Jean Cooney as copy-editor and I have been fortunate once again in securing the services of Alan Walker as indexer.

I owe thanks, too, to my wife, Kate, and two children, Robert and Catherine, for tolerating with good grace the demands that scholarship makes on family life.