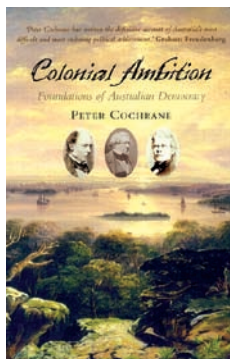


# Australian history's forgotten capitalists

John Roskam reviews

## *Colonial Ambition: Foundations of Australian Democracy*

by Peter Cochrane  
(Melbourne University Press,  
2006, 600 pages)



Melbourne University's strategy for marketing Peter Cochrane's *Colonial Ambition: Foundations of Australian Democracy* is almost as interesting as the book itself. This is a book placed firmly in the centre of politics of Australian publishing, and, indeed, the 'history wars'.

The publicity blurb on the back cover of *Colonial Ambition* is revealing. The book is described as being written with 'great brio and verve' and moving like a 'fast-paced novel'. (For those who don't know, 'brio' according to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* means 'liveliness'.) Maybe 'brio and verve' is what the marketing department of Melbourne University Press believes is these days required to sell books about Australian political history.

MUP must have also assumed that potential buyers of a book about the historical development of concepts such as representative government and parliamentary democracy are also looking for a bit of fast-paced action. Unfortunately, as good a work as *Colonial Ambition* is, and as important as it is, not much 'brio and verve' is contained within its pages. Anyone thinking they're buying a John Grisham thriller will be sadly disappointed. The full extent of what excitement there is in *Colonial Ambition* are the images of drunken Sydney mobs assembled at the Rocks, and the description of the death of Lady Mary Fitzroy, the wife of Governor Charles Fitzroy, killed in 1847 when the carriage she was riding in with her husband turned over on the road from Par-

ramatta to Sydney.

MUP has taken out an insurance policy just in case promises of 'brio and verve' don't work. On the front cover is an endorsement by none other than Graham Freudenberg, Gough Whitlam's speechwriter. According to Freudenberg 'Peter Cochrane has written the definitive account of Australia's most difficult and enduring political achievement.' This might be true, but why we need to be told this by Freudenberg is a mystery. No doubt the publisher calculated that more people would be attracted than scared off by his recommendation.

It seems that so far the efforts of the bright young things in the marketing department at MUP have been to no avail. According to newspaper reports up until the end of last year *Colonial Ambition* had sold 4,000 copies. Not a bad result but it pales in comparison to sales of 100,000 for Les Carlyon's *The Great War* (reviewed in the December 2006 edition of the *IPA Review*.)

In 2007 the two books shared the inaugural Prime Minister's prize for history. The outcome was not uncontroversial for it has been reported that a majority of the judging panel believed that *Colonial Ambition* should have been the sole recipient. However, the award was structured in such a way that the panel provided a shortlist to the Prime Minister who then personally decided upon the winner. Following this result, it was claimed by the then Prime Minister's critics that the shared award given to *The Great War* 'smacked of a PM over-eager to distribute the spoils of victory in the culture wars.'

If *Colonial Ambition* had been the sole winner there's every chance those critics would have claimed exactly the same thing. If anything, *Colonial Ambition* more closely fulfils John Howard's alleged cultural and historical agenda than does *The Great War*. Carlyon writes about the experience of Australian soldiers on the western front during the First World War. In as much as there are political overtones to the book they run counter to those which it is assumed John Howard would favour. Carlyon emphasises the separateness of the Australians from their British commanders, and he compares the resourcefulness of the colonials to the bureaucratic, hide-bound ways of the British. Anyone who took their political cues from *The Great War* would be more likely to emerge a republican than a monarchist, but the politics of Carlyon are subtle.

By contrast, in *Colonial Ambition* the politics is obvious and overt. The story Peter Cochrane charts is the battle between two competing images of the economic and social destiny of Australia. And the small-time capitalists win. Cochrane is accurate when he calls it a victory for a 'middle class vision'. The furious reaction of the burghers of Sydney to the attempted resumption of convict transportation in the 1850s was not only a product of the humanitarianism. They were reacting against the great landowners and squatters who wanted cheap convict labour to maintain their holdings, and they were reacting against the sort of economic development that the squatters demanded. As Cochrane writes, those who attended the anti-transportation meetings

embraced a vision of a new kind of economy—based not on one product [the wool of the squatters] but on many, not just on landed wealth but on a dynamic capitalism in the urban sector. They put the case for a free working class recognising the necessity of mass consumer demand as opposed to the narrow 'contractor's economy' of a penal society. They wanted a

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diversified productive sector sustained by local demand, rather than a plantation-type society dependent on the British call for wool.

Cochrane succeeds in placing the debate about the franchise within the broader context of the different conceptions of how New South Wales should develop. Too often in Australian history the arguments from the 1840s and 1850s over the franchise have been presented as merely a debate between stuck-in-the-mud conservatives and radical Chartists. In reality there was much more at play. Squatters defended their disproportionate voting influence because they believed they had to stand against urban mobs that were too easily swayed by appeals from demagogues, and they argued that rural interests, far removed from the temptations of city life were more pure and less corruptible.

To the magnates like William Wentworth and James Macarthur it was entirely reasonable that economic elites such as themselves guide the government of the colony—after all, it was they who generated the colony's wealth. According to Henry Dangar, a squatter with 300,000 acres of leaseholdings 'a man would have to be maniac to argue that the thousands of idlers who inhabited the alleyways of Sydney were equal to the squatter. The squatter could buy and sell Sydney twice over ... Sydney would be nothing without the woolgrowers of the interior. The woolgrowers were the blood and sinew of the colony, while Sydney and the townships were no more than dependencies.'

The idea that nineteenth century Australian political history is the story of the bosses against the workers has a powerful hold on the popular imagination. But this image—if indeed there is any truth to it—has its origins in the later part of the century: in the industrial turmoil of the 1890s. In the middle of the century the picture was more

complicated. It wasn't the workers that the conservatives feared—it was the capitalists. The squatters were no friend of the mercantile class. Wentworth left no doubt as to what he thought of the 'lords of the Exchange':

What interest does the population of Sydney represent? True there are hosts of people in the city calling themselves merchants, and I admit these give employment to a large number of others of lower degree. These merchants, however, are simply engaged in exchanging one commodity for another—in sending the produce of the colony home and getting the goods of foreign countries instead. But they as a class, with the exception of the ship owners, are productive of absolutely nothing to add to the wealth of the colony. There is no urgent necessity for them—the colony could do without them: all that this class of people have done for me, for instance, I could have done for myself.

These words uttered by Wentworth in 1853 would not have been out of place from the mouth of the most ardent socialist (excepting perhaps the reference to the usefulness of ship owners—for without ship owners Wentworth would not have been able to get his wool to England). The only words missing from this tirade are *bourgeoisie* and *rentier*.

Although Cochrane is not explicit about the parallels, there are similarities in the way the political debate was framed in the United States in the closing decades of the eighteenth century and what occurred in Australia fifty years later. In America the dominant political arguments were between Alexander Hamilton's ideal of economic development based on advanced commerce and industry, and Thomas Jefferson's ideal of individual, self-reliant landowners provid-

ing the backbone of the nation's democracy. Some have argued that this debate was not finally settled until the beginning of the twentieth century. In Australia it was a debate started and ended within a twenty year period between the 1840s and 1860s. Although the question of how land should be distributed would be an ongoing saga in New South Wales politics, the question of how the politics and the economy of the colony would develop was decided as soon as the squatters were prevented from gerrymandering the electoral system.

Political ideas are not taken seriously in this country because Australia's march towards liberal democracy is assumed to have been inevitable. Those ideas that are taken seriously by historians and political scientists are usually just reheated mid-century progressivism. *Colonial Ambition* demonstrates that politics in Australia started a long time before 1972.



Sir Henry Parkes at Faulconbridge, NSW, [1888-?] nla.pic-an23351381, National Library of Australia