



Birth of a Liberal Nation

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Analysis of books circulating in 19th century Australia suggests a deep engagement with the 'conservative enlightenment', argues Chris Berg.

How can we know how 19th century Australians thought about liberalism, economics and political economy? The question is of more than esoteric interest. Australians have long searched for their national character or identity in the ideological milieu of the first decades after settlement, and there is an assumption that if we can explain the culture of that time, we can shed light on the culture we have now. For the liberal pessimists of the 1930s, Australia's military origins set a trajectory of Australia's political culture that had yet to be overcome.

Another tradition sees early Australian life as a contest between conservatives and democrats, culminating in the former's defeat. Others locate Australia's early culture firmly in the Enlightenment values of the 18th century. Finally, a short but influential piece in 1985 by Hugh Collins established the interpretation of Australia as a Benthamite society, characterised by the utilitarian, individualist, rationalist and legalist philosophy of public policy founded by Jeremy

Bentham (1748-1832). It is an interesting idea—and one that seems to describe nicely our utilitarian political culture, grounded, practical, and sceptical of lofty ideals like human rights. But did the early colonists even read Bentham? I have taken a close look at the books of economics and political economy available to Australian colonists through an analysis of book catalogues and the Australian book trade between 1800 and 1849.

For all the emphasis in these works of the European ideas of the 18th and 19th centuries, and all the claims of their significance in Australian culture, we are not sure Australians actually had access to these foundational texts of liberalism, the enlightenment and political economy. The analysis here is built on an index of Australian book sales and auctions between 1800 and 1849 that was originally published in the 1970s. I supplemented this list with a few further auctions and sales identified by a manual search of the digitised newspaper collection now provided by the National Library. By building up a picture of the book trade and the books sold and presumably read by the public, we see 19th century Australians were deeply familiar with the great liberal economist Adam Smith, a strong stream of liberal thought, and their utilitarianism was more the religious utilitarianism of the theologian William Paley than the rationalistic utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham.

Tracts on economics and political economy no more dominated the literary market in the 19th century than they do today

There were three primary ways by which books were made available to the Australian colonists. The first was through their direct importation, bringing a personal library into the southern hemisphere (a classic example was provided by noted colonial figure Lady Jane Franklin, who related one passenger on her trip to Australia taking a group of working men “almost thro’ Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*”).

Other conduits were by purchasing at a bookseller, or by purchasing at auction. These latter two markets had a peculiar shape and economic characteristics, driven by both the specificities of the book trade and the fact that the reading public in Australia was small and the overwhelming majority of written work had to be imported vast distances.

The first sale of which we have information was in Sydney in January, 1805, at which were sold Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia*, and a copy of the classic legal text, William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Sales turn up in Hobart (1816), Launceston (1829), Perth (1837), Adelaide (1838), Maitland (1839), Melbourne (1839), Geelong (1841) and Brisbane (1846). A small number of advertisements and catalogues exist for sales in Windsor, Parramatta, and a large consignment in Port Fairy.

Of course, the fact that a book was offered for sale or auction does not necessarily imply that it was purchased, or read, or even desired. It has been argued that the early Australian market looks more like a dumping ground for the disposal of excess British stock, but this objection should not be taken too far. Reviews and commentaries in Australian newspapers on English literature suggested the same authors dominated public discussion as made up the consignments;

with heavy representations from Dickens, Scott, Byron, Shakespeare and Milton.

A further issue concerns who read the books. An analysis from 1847 suggested that just under 80 per cent of Sydney residents could read, but then as now there is clearly a distinction between threshold ability to read and consumption of books, as reading tastes varied considerably according to education and wealth. While data is sparse, it seems that poorer Australians preferred religious tracts and true crime. It is entirely possible that the books of political economy identified here were not read by the bulk of the population. It is also entirely possible that these books were purchased, but not read. Even so, an unread book tells us a lot about the vision colonists had of themselves and the values they wanted to reinforce and project.

The mixture of books available to Australian colonists seems to reflect enlightenment interests, as well as more direct local concerns

From a database of 1,889 listed sale events I extracted the details of recognisable, identifiable individual books which directly address principles and attitudes towards politics, political economy, economic questions, as well as key enlightenment texts.

There are limits to this approach, of course. Australian readers no doubt drew lessons from the works of Dickens and inferences from Shakespeare about the role of the state and the morality and purpose of the exchange economy. Some works aimed explicitly to draw out economic lessons from literary devices, such as Harriet Martineau's fictionalised economic tales, such as in *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832).

Other principles of political economy could no doubt be directly and indirectly derived from the large quantities of religious works available in the colony.

Tracts on economics and political economy no more dominated the literary market in the 19th century than they do today. Australian bookshelves were filled by history, biography, religion, school books and, of course, fiction, poetry and plays. Readers could get their hands on a few copies of David Hume's *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, but much more common was his very popular *History of England*. Practical works were also common. J.R. McCulloch's textbooks on political economy were occasionally available, but far more prevalent was his enormously successful *Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical and Historical, of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (1832). McCulloch's Dictionary was not a work of political economy but contained much that was drawn from the Scottish tradition of political economy; with the heavy emphasis on statistical work giving economics a position as a social science.

The second table (previous page) shows the result of this analysis. The most striking thing about the table is the dominance of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* during this period, with 132 copies available in 128 separate book sales and auctions. It first appears in a small auction of "the Property of a Gentleman, deceased" in 1812, and remains enough of a fixture to be often described as among the standard works in advertisements of the era.

Smith's book was a fixture of discussion and debate about taxation, land reform and labour. Notably, *The Wealth of Nations* was part of the first syllabus (alongside Nassau Senior's *Political Economy*) of the University of Melbourne's 1855 Political Economy course that was taught by William E. Hearn, who had arrived in the colony that year.

The inculcation of Smithian ideas was not limited to copies of the *Wealth of Nations*. Harriet Martineau intended her popularisations of political economy to bring the ideas of modern political economy to those "outside [James Mill's] Political Economy Club" and her indebtedness to Smith's economics in particular has been widely recognised. Smith's book, to Martineau, was "marvellous when all the circumstances are considered, but ... not fitted nor designed to teach the science to the great mass of the people". Smith's intellectual influence over Martineau was extensive. The eponymous Miss Martineau appeared in extracts in newspapers throughout the 1830s and 1840s, particularly her *Society in America*, which leaned heavily on the idea of sympathy detailed in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).

Blackstone's *Commentaries* and Burke's conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France* were far more available to colonists than Bentham's works

Smith's was not the only key economic work available in Australia. The historical record shows four copies of David Ricardo's *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), with the first recorded sale of Ricardo in 1828.

The mixture of books available to Australian colonists seems to reflect enlightenment interests, as well as more direct local concerns. Given the significance of Malthusian theories of population to Australia's colonisation and its indigenous population, it is unsurprising to see the prevalence of his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), and Australian libraries were scattered with works that fed off the population debate (both for and against Malthusian theories).

Four copies of Malthus' *Principles of Political Economy* (1820) were also available.

Classical enlightenment authors were widely available, including six copies of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* in translation, the works of Voltaire and Rousseau as a collection and in separate volumes, and in both French and English.

When Governor George Gipps returned to England in 1846, he put up his property for auction including 86 French volumes of Voltaire, including 20 volumes of correspondence and a 14-volume edition of his philosophical dictionary.

The works of John Locke were also widely available in the colonies. While there were at least nine copies of his full collected works on sale, the more common individual works gives some indication of interest in Lockean ideas. At least 32 separate copies of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and 14 copies of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) were made available for sale in this period.

Seven more copies of *Human Understanding* were distributed as *Locke and Bacon*, a volume in which his philosophical essay was paired with a collection of Francis Bacon's essays.

Hugh Collins argued in his 1985 essay that ours is fundamentally a utilitarian society, applying the Benthamite calculation of "the greatest good for the greatest number". Bentham had famously focussed on utility rather than rights, arguing that "natural rights is nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense—nonsense upon stilts".

If the society was utilitarian, it certainly was not exclusively so. The index lists 56 copies of individual works by Jeremy Bentham which, on this face of it, is a substantial number, but Bentham's writings are notable for their variety and their volume, and there are no stand-out works in the Australian collections. The most prevalent was the six copies of the five-volume *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* (Bentham, 1827) and only two copies of his landmark *Fragment on Government* (Bentham, 1776) and *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Bentham, 1789), although the editions of Bentham's "Works" advertised in Sydney in 1846 and 1847 very likely were included in those volumes.

Works by Bentham were available in libraries, but not also where they might have been expected. A catalogue of the Sydney Law Library in 1843 had 472 volumes of legal and non-legal works, yet none by Bentham. In their reading material at least, it is not obvious that Australians followed Benthamite notions of progress and improvement.

The first appearance of his books in the Australian colonies (via import) was only in 1831, and it was only in 1834 (two years after Bentham's death) that a volume was made available for sale. For each of those Australian characteristics Collins attributes to Bentham's interests, there were large quantities of works available in the colony directly opposed.

Blackstone's *Commentaries* and Burke's conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France* were directly counterpoised against Benthamite notions of reform, and each were far more available to Australian colonists than Bentham's work. Where Burke and Bentham line up together against the doctrine of natural rights, Locke and Blackstone present a countervailing influence. Blackstone and *The Constitution of England* by the Swiss liberal Jean Louis de Lolme (1775) offered colonists a contrary view on Bentham's legalism.

Yet Jeremy Bentham was not the only possible source for the transmission of what Collins describes as 'Benthamism'. Utilitarian ethics had a strong influence on one writer whose books rivalled Adam Smith for prevalence in the colony. William Paley was best known in the Australian colonies for his theological works—particularly *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794) and *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802). In his *Natural Theology* Paley formulated the watchmaker analogy for the existence of God, and his *Principles Of Moral And Political Philosophy* (1785) was widely available in the colonies.

It may even be that purchasers of the works were uninterested in the secular philosophy of government bundled along with his Christian apologetics, but regardless of what the colonists



thought of Paley's brand of utilitarianism, it was much more available than Bentham's.

Australian utilitarianism had a deeply religious strand. Paleyan utilitarianism has many similarities with Benthamite utilitarianism—such as the moral priority of happiness, and happiness as indicated by the balance of pleasure and pain—but Paley's utilitarianism was founded in a deeper notion of the desire of God to bring about human happiness. Where Bentham was a radical, Paley was a political conservative, pointing out the unintended consequences of change and arguing only gradual, conservative and institutionally-minded change could work in the service of utilitarian happiness.

In a 2015 essay for *Econ Journal Watch* on classical liberalism in Australia, I argued there was a deep current of liberal thought in 19th century Australia. The article by Dr Zachary Gormann in the August issue of the *IPA Review* on NSW Premier Joseph Carruthers captures the spirit of this colonial liberalism, and makes the entirely reasonable claim that Australia was at the time perhaps the most liberal nation in the world. The records of books helps fill out that picture.

Nineteenth century Australia was more conservative than the Benthamite radicalism depicted by Collins, but the conservatism should not be overstated. Paley and Burke's conservatism was deeply challenged by liberal economics and natural rights theorists.

This analysis of book sales suggests a deep engagement with what has been called the 'conservative enlightenment', an intellectual environment where liberals such as Adam Smith and John Locke were in contest with conservatives such as William Paley, William Blackstone and Edmund Burke.

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