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How The West Spread South

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Australia's colonists were deeply engaged with—and considered themselves very much part of—the 'conservative Enlightenment'. We know this thanks to a study of the flourishing book trade in the colonial era undertaken by IPA Adjunct Fellow Dr Chris Berg, presented in the December 2018 issue of *IPA Review* in an article titled *The Birth of a Liberal Nation*.

Dr Berg, also a Senior Research Fellow at RMIT University, looked at the types of works which passed through the auctioneers' hands in Australia in the early 19th century and ended up on many a colonists' bookshelf, and found they tell us a great deal about the questions colonists were asking as well as the challenges they faced. They had to decide what sort of institutions they were going to choose, whether to establish protectionist or free trade colonies, to focus on individual liberty or continue as originally established as a military outpost. Early colonists turned to classics of the Enlightenment to answer these questions, consulting the great economists, philosophers and legal minds of the 18th and 19th centuries, and applying their ideas to build a new society.

Among the 'best sellers' were Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and David Hume's *History of England*. Colonists not only brought with them Enlightenment values of liberty and freedom, they carried English common law in the form of William Blackstone's momentous *Commentaries on the Laws of England*—highly valued as a guide to the unique tradition of the English Common Law, one which then and now provides the basis of equal rights before the law.

We now know the colonists were well-read and highly literate individuals who brought with them a worldly and enlightened European view. The new colony was an outpost on the other side of the world from Britain, but it was an outpost of Western Civilisation.

I had previously made for the IPA a short film in our *British Heritage of Our Freedoms* series on how the British system of law arrived with the First Fleet. In *'The Castle' in 18th Century Australia* I detailed how the Letters Patent (the First Charter of Justice), signed by George III, gave fundamental rights to all in the new colony, including free Europeans, convicts, and Aboriginal Australians. Almost straight away, a convict couple famously used these laws to sue the captain of the ship for their lost luggage, and were successful.

Berg's article was an opportunity to record the next chapter in the story of Australia's development. I was captivated by the notion these books are a tangible link to our past, a physical



connection between Australians living in the 21st century, and those men and women of the Enlightenment inhabiting the 18th century world of Britain and Europe.

One of the key features of the Enlightenment was absolute faith in improvement and an unwavering belief in the possibilities of progress. The British brought this confidence with them to the new colony when they arrived in Botany Bay with the First Fleet in 1788, and this confidence made Australia the successful nation it is today. Being reminded of this confidence is important in light of current negative attitudes towards Australia as a modern nation propounded by certain members of the media, the political class, and in academia. Furthermore, I thought it important to make the film for the sake of many younger Australians who are simply not taught, either at school or university, about the Enlightenment.

The making of *How the Enlightenment Came to Australia* was an adventure I will never forget. The process began with the assistance of incredibly helpful librarians by working out which of the 'best sellers' were available to look at in the NSW State Library. I also contacted experts in politics, economics and the law, and arranged to interview them about their particular fields in the context of the early colonists and their choice of books.

Having organised times and locations, I flew with Saul Muscatel, the IPA's resident videographer/video producer, up to Sydney where we spent two days rushing around with heavy cameras to interview four experts. One of the stars was Professor John Gascoigne, author of *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*. Professor Gascoigne was generous enough to sit with me for almost four hours in the beautiful book-lined William Dixson Research Library in the NSW State Library. Together we looked at first editions of Burke, Locke, Smith, Hume and Blackstone, while talking about their significance in the context of Australia's foundation. The library requested a librarian be present at all times during the handling of such rare books, and they were so fascinated at what Professor Gascoigne had to say about each item that they joined in the discussion after the cameras stopped rolling.

We also filmed in a Barrister's chambers and the NSW State Parliament. All participants in the film were delighted to be involved, and extremely positive and knowledgeable about their respective subjects. Thankfully, everything ran according to clockwork ... apart from when I fell over in the street as I alighted from a taxi just before one of the interviews, which was more humiliating than anything else!

After flying back to Melbourne we filmed my scenes in Queen Victoria Market, outside the Melbourne Supreme Court, inside a fascinating shop called Wunderkammer which sells scientific curiosities, artefacts and ephemera, and finally in Kay Craddock's wonderful rare book shop, which is housed in a graceful faux-gothic building in Collins Street.

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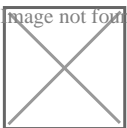




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I think we achieved the aim of making the film look as varied and beautiful as possible.

By the end of the process, we had conducted and filmed six interviews. We took a total of six hours of footage which included the all-important B-roll, much of which never makes it off the cutting room floor. After a number of edits we arrived at the final version of the 15-minute film, which is incidentally the longest and perhaps the most ambitious film we have made to date as part of the IPA's Foundations of Western Civilisation Program.

The final—and one of the most important decisions to make before finishing the film— was the choice of music. Thankfully, the music of the Enlightenment period is as positive as the 18th century movement was, and is thus a readymade soundtrack. After going through a number of 'music of the Enlightenment' albums on Spotify, we settled upon an optimistic, relatively fast-paced *Trio Sonata* by the most enlightened of composers, George Frideric Handel.

We must not forget European settlement of Australia came at a time in the history of Western Civilisation when ideas about individual liberty, government's role, religion and science had been debated, tried and tested. When the colonists thought about how to build their new society, they applied the ideas of Economic Freedom, Rule of Law and Equal Rights. Many of these ideas were in the books they brought with them. I hope this film will serve as a reminder that the modern state of Australia in which we live now was brought into the known world by the Enlightenment intellectual adventure, then founded—20 years later—on Enlightenment values.

View *How the Enlightenment Came To Australia* and '*The Castle*' in 18th Century Australia on the [IPA's YouTube Channel](#) or at <https://ipa.org.au/heritage-of-our-freedoms>. Production of these films was made possible by the generous support of the Scobie and Claire Mackinnon Trust.