FROM THE GARDEN OF EDEN TO MAD MAX
This book should be considered a perfect foil for the pessimism of the Left, and an ideal primer for the economically illiterate. It would be an inspiring Christmas present for anyone floundering with notions of economic progress, who doubts man’s ability to respond to environmental problems, or for those worried by peak oil or climate change. It would be just the counter for silly books like *Affluenza* by Clive Hamilton and for middle class Greens voters in inner city electorates. However, don’t expect the book to turn up in any of the plethora of literary festivals and ‘Dangerous Ideas’ talkfests.

How many people do you know who become indignant when you suggest to them that we are better off than at any other time in human history, or dare to suggest that our cities are brilliant, exciting places, or that the West is a better place to live than any of those vibrant, picturesque ‘Peregrine Adventures’ countries? *The Rational Optimist* gives us a thousands reasons why this is so.

Starting with the question of why wealth and material wellbeing has increased exponentially in recent times, Matt Ridley, author of other best sellers, *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* and *Nature via Nurture: Genes, Experience, & What Makes Us Human*, explains how the four most basic human needs—food, clothing, fuel and shelter—have become so much cheaper and more abundant in the last two centuries, for everyone.

He starts simply with an example of a coastal tribe that trades fish with an inland tribe that makes fishing nets. The inland tribe gains in improved nutrition and the coastal tribe gains in productivity. They can either trade more fish or work less on fishing. Everyone is much better off. Everyone gets more from less. But the most intriguing and thoroughly satisfying example to illustrate this central principle of ‘more from less’ is that of the cost and availability of artificial light. Light—to read a book, say—in England in 1300AD was 20,000 times more costly than it is today. To measure it in hours of work needed to pay for that light is striking. Today, for an hour of standard electric reading light, you need to work for half a second on an average wage. In 1800, you would have to have worked for six hours, using a tallow candle. That, according to Matt Ridley, is a 43,000 fold improvement. For those intrigued by this problem, he also calculates the time needed in Babylon in 1750BC to earn that hour of reading from a sesame-oil lamp.

It is the profundity of examples like this about a thing we take for granted that demonstrates that most of us have no idea of just

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how good things have become for us and most of the world’s poor, even in our own life time. Botswana, a typical African country, is landlocked, drought-prone, and had only 8 miles of paved road at independence in 1966. It then had only 22 black university graduates and 200 school finishers. Devastated by AIDS, a one-party state, and by cattle disease, it was the fourth poorest country in the world. According to Ridley, this country had every one of Africa’s curses. But what happened? Botswanans today earn more than the average Finn did in 1951.

Examples of staggering improvement abound. Infant mortality is lower today in Nepal than it was in Italy in 1951. The average Mexican lives longer now than the average Briton did in 1955. How on earth did this happen? This book explains why.

These considerations force two major issues to surface in this reviewer’s mind. Why is it that the rich middle class that we inhabit in the West has so little idea of how much things have improved for everyone over time, and has so little idea of how and why things have improved? The corollary is, of course, the impossibility for us to imagine just how bad things were, even in our recent past. The Rousseauian fantasy is alive and very well amongst us. Matt Ridley tackles the problem by pulling hard on the village peasant’s muddy boot-straps to disabuse the reader of any notion that life was better in the past. His description of the life of an eighteenth century peasant is harrowing. The ‘rose-tinted nostalgia’ of today’s wealthy, who pine for a better past on grounds of ‘simplicity, tranquillity, spirituality, free of dioxin or radioactive fall-out in the cow’s milk’, the author sardonically reminds us, is only possible because they have ‘fallen in love with mud’.

Or, if the reader is still not convinced about how things have improved he throws in another problem; that of the chaos and suffering brought on by nearly constant warfare. To the romantic comment that hunters and gatherers were litle and healthy, he replies, ‘it was because the fat and slow had all been shot in the back at dawn’. The horrors of the twentieth century compare well to the world of the noble savage.

... the warfare death rate of 0.5 percent of the population per years that was typical of many hunter-gatherer societies would equate to two billion people dying during the twentieth century ... forget the Garden of Eden; think Mad Max.

Ridley succinctly sums up the progress of just the last 50 years. It is worth quoting:

The average human being on Planet Earth earned nearly three times as much money, ate one-third more calories of food, buried one-third as many of her children and could expect to live one-third longer. She was less likely to die as a result of war, murder, childbirth, accidents, tornadoes, flooding, famine, whooping cough, tuberculosis, malaria, diphtheria, typhus, typhoid, measles, smallpox, scurvy or polio. She was less likely at any given age, to get cancer, heart disease, or stroke. She was more likely to be literate and to have finished school. She was more likely to own a telephone, a flush toilet, a refrigerator, and a bicycle. All this during a half-century when the world population has more than doubled, so that far from being rationed by population pressure, the goods and services available to the people of the world have expanded. It is, by any standard, an astonishing human achievement.

Under different headings, the book looks at the mechanisms for this universal human improvement. Ridley canvases the effect of virtue and trust developed through trade and commerce. He rehearse the familiar arguments that market societies require fairness in interaction and trade. As a result, time and again, traditional honour-based feudal societies give way to commercial, prudence-based economies, and the effect is civilising rather than coarsening. He explains the impact of exchange and specialisation through what he calls ‘the collective brain’, and the explosion of ideas, inventions, new technologies and discoveries—the ‘invention of invention’. Improvements in farming and food production will allow humanity to feed 9 billion in the near future. But, central to all progress has been the revolutionary discovery of mechanical energy—carbon—from 1700 onwards. ‘The story of energy is simple. Once upon a time all work was done by people for themselves using their own muscles.’ To put it graphically, Ridley tells us the average person consumes about 600 calories a second of mechanical energy.

This means that it would take 150 slaves, working eight-hour shifts each, to peddle you to your current lifestyle.
have to live in slavery for the rest to have a decent standard of living, as indeed they did in Bronze Age empires.

Nevertheless, an important corollary to Ridley’s very convincing optimism is his keen understanding and salutary historical reminder of the inevitability of pessimism. He well understands the familiar ‘sustainability’ song: ‘Growth Can’t Continue at its Present Pace.’ He bluntly agrees: ‘If it can’t then it won’t.’ However, he adds, this green-left mind block about limits misses the whole point. Humans adapt.

‘That is the whole point of human progress, the whole message of cultural evolution, the whole import of dynamic change—the whole thrust of this book.’ Ridley reminds us that pessimism is not a new idea, and is fundamentally unfounded. In the 1830s when the West was about ‘to explode into modernity’, with a life of ‘ever-increasing wealth, health, wisdom and safety’, there were the ever-present critics. They worried that passing trains would cause horses to abort their foals, and what would the use of trains going so fast be, anyway. The Quarterly Review at the time urged Parliament to limit trains legally to eight or nine miles an hour. The British Poet Laureate Robert Southey not only thought the present day progress for people was far worse than in the days of Henry VIII or even in the time of Caesar and the Druids, he was certain of a future of misery, famine, plague and a decline of religion. This was at a time when the ‘British working poor’s earnings were about to double in thirty years.’

Thomas Macauley in 1830 was talking about those who believed that society had reached a ‘turning point’. Ridley points out that defining moments, tipping points, thresholds and points of no return have been encountered, it seems, by pessimists in every generation since. In spite of the extraordinary progress in every domain, there are always intellectuals obsessed with imminent decline, degeneration and disaster. Bestsellers of time, included Max Nordau’s Degeneration, Charles Wagner’s The Simple Life, Robert Tressell’s The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists to Henry Adams’ The Education of Henry Adams, in which he contrasts the spiritual energy of the Virgin Mary with the material energy of a huge dynamo seen at an exhibition. Adams thought this ‘foresaw the “ultimate, colossal, cosmic collapse” of civilization’. Ridley points out how we are overwhelmed by the pessimistic. At an airport lounge he finds books by Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, Al Franken, Al Gore, John Gray, Naomi Klein, George Monbiot and Michael Moore…Even good news is presented as bad.

It is unnecessary here to detail the list of mad predictions that have been uttered in the recent past: from the Club of Rome, Paul Ehrlich’s repetitive nonsense, Rachel Carson’s irresponsible and damaging Silent Spring, right down to Australia’s own Tim Flannery on his predictions of imminent demise of almost all of Australian capital cities’ water supplies! Overwhelmingly, on reading this book, one asks oneself, why are we all so gullible? John Stuart Mill pinned it down in a speech on ‘perfectibility’ when he said:

I have observed that not the man who hopes when others despair, but the man who despairs when others hope, is admired by a large class of persons as a sage.

It would not be hard to claim two things. Firstly, the above statement is absolutely true when we think of Tim Flannery becoming Australian of Year – under the Howard government. Secondly, it goes a long way towards explaining why people eagerly absorb doomsday messages from the media about melting ice caps, extinction of species, runaway global warming, peak oil or whatever. However, Ridley gives us a combative epigraph by Macauley in one of his chapters, which effectively sums up the book:

On what principle is it, that when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?

We should confront every alarmist with this retort every time he or she is encountered.