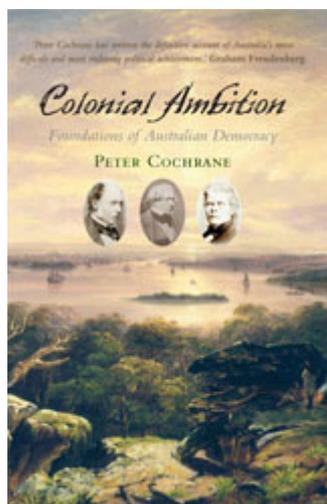


***Colonial Ambition: Foundations of Australian Democracy*** by Peter Cochrane. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006, pp. 581, AUD \$60 Paperback, ISBN: 0522853315.



Sometimes a reviewer can only stand and cheer. Peter Cochrane's *Colonial Ambition* is a triumph of a book, superbly researched, finely judged and beautifully written. Cochrane set out to tell the story, and explain the mystery, of how New South Wales jumped from autocracy to democracy in just two unlikely decades. Around 1840, when the narrative begins, the colony was ruled by a governor sent out from Britain, who generally found himself sparring with a small number of wealthy if insecure pastoralists who spouted the vocabulary of eighteenth-century discontent. Twenty years later, not only was there an undreamed-of measure of local autonomy, but political power had leap-frogged the bewildered squatters and passed to representatives of the ordinary people (many of them people who had not even set foot in Australia two decades earlier). Cochrane reminds us that the outcome was not inevitable, and insists that the fact that it all turned out as it did owes much to the vivid cast of characters who fought for control. Hence his title: ultimately power ended up with the men (sometimes egged on by their womenfolk) who were most determined to assert their authority. That, in bald summary, is the theme of this captivating book. Above all, the speed of the transition is captured in Cochrane's racy prose. In 1848, men like Henry Parkes worked with becoming humility to elect a representative who promptly turned his back on them. A decade later, those same men were calling the colonial tune.

But its particular triumph lies in the way the book has been written, in its style, descriptiveness and attack. Cochrane is a master at capturing the essence of the personalities who troop through his pages. Take his curtain-raising portrayal of Robert Lowe (pp. 61-2), the haughty demagogue of 1848. Most historians would home in on his weak eyesight, caused by the fact that he was an albino – a physical challenge that in the ingeniously no-holds-barred world of Sydneyside vituperation was used to dismiss him as bisexual. Cochrane prefers to home in on the man himself, 'a slick assemblage of talent and eloquence ... an Oxford man, a smarty-pants, a snob, a swot, a wit, an aristocrat of the intellect and a wearer of fancy floral waistcoats.' Only then does he move to Lowe's physical appearance, 'a rower's upper body on needle-thin legs', before finally identifying his weak eyesight as the reason why he had decided to chance his arm in Australia. A few bold brush-strokes create a devastating picture, one that is both memorable and alarmingly credible. But note – the Victorians, as Cochrane demonstrates, were inventive when it came to terms of abuse, but 'smarty-pants' was almost certainly not one of them. Nineteen times out of twenty, when a historian uses twenty-first century vernacular to describe nineteenth-century situations, the result is a disaster. This book is the exception. Time and again, the author sails close to the linguistic wind, spraying adjectives like 'cranky' and 'prickly' across the page. But each time, he somehow avoids anachronism. On the one hand, he is subtly reminding us that the political world of Macarthur and Parkes was not so far from that of Howard and Rudd, but on the other he focuses on the distinctive world in which his characters lived. We observe and sympathise with them as they cope with the death of children. The description of the carriage accident that killed the governor's wife, Lady Mary FitzRoy, is deft and sympathetic, all the more

so because she died because her husband notoriously drove like a boy racer. One poignant episode comes from the life of William Charles Wentworth, the son of a convict mother who married (a little late in their fecund relationship) the daughter of an emancipist, making them trebly shunned by respectable society. Their beloved daughter Thomasine married an immigrant lawyer called Thomas Fisher. Historians generally avoid moral censure, but there seems no factual alternative to regarding Fisher as a prize shit. He duly pocketed Thomasine's dowry, a slice of her acres, cash and building sites, and then informed her that she was to have no further contact with her scandalous parents. *Colonial Ambition* ends with both Wentworth and his daughter living back in England, only a few miles apart, and desperately trying to maintain contact by letter. But, on the public stage, Wentworth gave as good as he got, and his angry delight on hearing the news of the death of Sir George Gipps indicates that he did not merely trade blows as political theatre.

Cochrane handles language the way FitzRoy drove carriage horses, but he does not crash and he consistently evades the trap of anachronism. Even more remarkable, he elegantly slips from his own prose into extensive, but never suffocating, quotation from the men of the time. 'Political Sydney was embarked on yet another round of epithet hurling', he remarks at one point (p. 159), and off we plunge into the conspiratorial back room of Henry Parkes's toy shop, or the crowded stalls of a Sydney theatre hired out for one more protest meeting. One gets the feeling that every phrase is measured, and when Cochrane shocks, he shocks with a purpose. *Mea culpa*-like, let me illustrate just how easy it is to slip across that fine line, for an author to become beguiled by seductive prose. Twenty years ago, I wrote about the 1853 'bunyip aristocracy' episode. I too tried to conjure up an invocation of Sydney, one that would enable the reader to feel what it was like to experience a racy public debate on the future of the colony. One clear lesson in the light of Cochrane's book is that such reconstructions are more effective when spread over a couple of decades, using the binoculars rather than the microscope. But another comes from the contrast in our respective handling of Wentworth's volcanic farewell speech to the old Legislative Council, delivered in September 1853, just as he was about to depart, probably finally, for England — a speech that Cochrane homes in upon in his Introduction. Portentously, I described that oration as a condemnation of a fast-changing colonial society that Wentworth no longer understood. Discreetly, in the back alley of a footnote, Cochrane takes me to task: Wentworth, he says, understood the new world of gold-rush, free settler Australia all too well, that was why he did not like it and that was why he was leaving. I could put up a dictionary rearguard and plead for a linguistic distinction between comprehension and understanding, but on balance I am inclined to put my hands up and say: OK, I let myself be seduced by rotund phraseology and I accept the correction. Hence my admiration for Cochrane's consistently powerful but measured use of language.

But, wait a minute, surely reviewing is all about grumbling, hinting darkly at inattention and incomprehension? Are there no reservations about Cochrane's tome? Well, a few, but the trouble is they do not affect the overall impression of excellence. On balance, I should prefer John Arthur Roebuck and Charles James Fox, just as an Australian reviewer might snarl at some hapless Pom for referring to John Lang or William Wentworth. But the truth is that Cochrane is just as racily insightful about what went on in the realm of British high politics as he is for the colonial stage. The Colonial Office lawyer whom George Higinbotham would later memorably dismiss as a 'person called Rogers' was a k-less Frederic, like W.S. Gilbert's hero who was apprenticed to a pirate. But even if Cochrane gets the forename wrong by that single letter, he is spot-on in identifying the importance of the Rogers intervention in 1854 in

setting limits to colonial autonomy under responsible government. There is one real howler that would normally trigger my wrath, but so persuasive is Cochrane's prose that my instinct was to blame Nelson for not winning the battle of Waterloo: how on earth could he have got himself killed at Trafalgar ten years earlier when he was so obviously needed to clinch an argument here? Equally, the research for this wide-ranging book is impressively comprehensive. The only omitted source that I noted as probably worth quotation was John W. Cell's 1970 Yale University Press study, *British Colonial Administration in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, which contains a memorable section on the first New South Wales responsible government ministry, the Donaldson cabinet, struggling to take charge of a bureaucracy abruptly abandoned by the ousted bureaucrats. Maybe I have a *Whitaker's Almanack* mind, but I like historians to dwell not just on the statistics but on the meaning of population. Cochrane is effective in capturing the physical size of Sydney and demonstrating how physical proximity — it was small enough for people to walk everywhere — contributed to the dynamism of its popular politics. But I should have liked to have the point rammed home: Sydney in 1856 contained the same number of people as Wagga Wagga today. Overall, the population of New South Wales in the 1850s was about half that of modern Tasmania: that, surely, is a context that tells us something about the importance of personalities and the depth of legislative talent. My only other complaint is directed not at the author but at the publisher. Often, the typeface has an amateur appearance, with too many sentences slumped up against the preceding full stop. I claim to be the leading technophobe on the south coast of Ireland, but I think I would know how to play with a find-and-replace command to tidy up spacing, and Melbourne University Press certainly ought to have made more effort.

If there is a deeper reservation about this book, it is about the concept of democracy itself. Outside certain enclaves in the city of Brussels, pretty much everybody in the Western world believes in democracy, even if nobody seems very sure what it means, or at least how it should manifest itself in specific countries where it is an alleged aspiration. So I do not blame Cochrane for omitting to tackle an issue that so obviously flummoxes the finest brains of the Bush administration. Early on, democracy is defined in an aside as 'meaning manhood suffrage' (p. 30). Towards the end, we are told that 'democracy as it was understood in the mid-nineteenth century' also included the secret ballot (p. 456). It is fair enough to argue that rampant democracy could co-exist with a nominated upper house, as Cochrane demonstrates in his handling of land reform, but there is at least a theoretical limitation in the democratic credentials of this form of bicameralism. More to the point, despite the clarion calls of Dr Lang, colonial ambition never extended to the formal declaration of independence that Rogers thought he was temporarily fending off in 1854. Part of the Australian achievement was to bring about democracy without formal control over sovereignty, and that paradox deserves to be underlined.

Cochrane's book is published in association with the commemoration of 150 years of responsible government in New South Wales. It is splendid that it should so successfully build bridges across political and social time, and fitting that it should illuminate so many issues of Australian identity now and for the future.

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