

We came, we saw, we made the very best of it

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM January 25, 2019



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke.

As long ago as January 26, 1817, only a few years after the colony of NSW had come into existence, some 40 guests celebrated its founding at the Sydney home of Isaac Nichols, a former convict who was the settlement's postmaster.

The evening featured "an excellent dinner, accompanied by royal toasts and festive songs", David Kemp tells us in his brilliant book, *The Land of Dreams: How Australians Won Their Freedom, 1788-1860*, published late last year by Melbourne University Press. The songs were not mere amusements. Rather, they expressed the guests' hopes for the territory on which they had landed: hopes of peace and prosperity. Against the backdrop of ceaseless European wars, Robert Jenkins, a merchant, gave those aspirations voice:

*While Europe's powers in conflict dire,
Exhaust the flower of armies brave,
Here peace shall flourish, none conspire,
With human blood thy soil to lave.
Rise, Australia, with peace and plenty crown'd,
Thy name shall one day be renowned.*

Two centuries later, it would be hard to deny that their hopes have been realised — and to a greater extent than even those dreamers could have imagined.

“With each birth,” Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Human Condition*, “something uniquely new comes into the world” that precisely because of its uniqueness, defies the “overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probabilities”, opening up “the possibility of a miracle”.

And so it was with the penal colony at the edge of the world. Some new countries suffer the fate of Venezuela; Australia, from its unpromising beginnings, became a haven of affluence and stability.

To say that is not to deny the suffering inflicted along the way, not merely on many who made the dangerous journey but also, and most grievously, on the continent's indigenous inhabitants.

Yet when we celebrate a birthday we scarcely wash away the past, with all its flaws and disappointments. Nor could we: by its nature, human action is irreversible, and the history of societies, like that of individuals, is a one-way street.

However, it is precisely because the past, whatever it may have been, is past, that it is possible to aspire for a better future, as the settlers did in

feting Australia Day; and the greater the legacy the past has bequeathed, the firmer are the foundations on which that future can be built.

That is the great merit of Kemp's book: it not only provides a riveting account of the battles by which the colonists obtained the freedoms they referred to as the "inalienable rights of Englishmen" but also and especially shines a light on the ideas that guided them in their struggle, laying the basis for today's Australia.

In doing so, Kemp rejects a view that casts the country as an intellectual desert, and its politics even more so: a politics, as Walter Bagehot put it, of "pitiless realism", dominated by a ruthless fight between competing interests whose literal "bare-mindedness" subordinated all ideals to a "worship of visible value".

But if this was a desert, Kemp argues, it was one from which prophets came. And they came not just armed with the swirling mass of concepts and conceptions the settlers brought from early 19th-century Britain but formed and informed by the great debates then raging in Europe and North America about liberty, democracy and equality.

Yes, the "tyranny of distance" meant it took months for the latest texts of those debates' leading protagonists — from Alexis de Tocqueville to John Stuart Mill — to arrive. However, the long wait only made the colonists hungrier for the most recent insights and all the more prompt in translating them into the rhetoric of political argument.

At the heart of that rhetoric was liberalism. The term was not a new one: in its original meaning of liberality of mind and spirit, it had played an important part in Roman political theory, with Cicero describing it in 44BC as the "very bond of human society". But the Oxford English Dictionary records that by 1772 it had come to mean "free from bias, prejudice, or bigotry; open-minded, tolerant", and only a few years later it was being used to describe a politics that stressed constitutional liberty, individual

responsibility and the rule of law.

It was that liberalism, forged from England's "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, that suffused the new colonies' formative years, defining the language of politics and placing all those who opposed it irrevocably on the defensive. And it was that liberalism which, from the outset, constituted the "party of initiative", relentlessly promoting the settlers' right to determine the course of their own lives.

Viewed in hindsight, its trajectory seemed to bear out the wisdom of Brecht's insight that "if there are obstacles in the way, the shortest path between two points may be a crooked line". More than once, as it sought that path, it had to reinvent itself.

But for all its detours and mutations, it underpinned the liberty we take for granted and that made Australia, and the other countries of British heritage, so distinctive.

To have demonstrated that as convincingly as Kemp has is a tremendous achievement. That there is much to disagree with, as there must be in a work of such ambition, does not detract from the book's claim to figure alongside classics of liberal history such as Guido De Ruggiero's *History of European Liberalism*, which first appeared in 1925.

But the parallel is inevitably disquieting. No less than Kemp, but far more self-consciously so, De Ruggiero was influenced by Hegel, who believed that once ideas such as liberty arose on the world scene, they acquired a momentum that refashioned the world in which they first appeared.

Yet De Ruggiero also knew that the golden era of continental liberalism had drawn to a close. Echoing Hegel's dictum that "the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the coming of the dusk", he sensed that to grasp the historical reality of European liberalism was to bid it farewell. No doubt, his book was intended to carry what remained of its vision into

the future. More than most, however, he understood that history forces us to be aware not just of triumphs but also of failures, denying the proud memories and soaring hopes that sustain good combat.

This year, Australian liberalism will also face a decisive moment. How it will fare, after its myriad errors and misadventures, remains to be seen. But as we celebrate Australia Day, Kemp has given us good reason to treasure its contribution and rekindle its promise.