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2nd Edition

Australian History

for
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A Wiley Brand



Discover the events that shaped the nation

Grasp the impact of Indigenous culture and colonisation

Appreciate Australia's great scientific and sporting feats

Alex McDermott

Historian



Australian History

2nd Edition

by Alex McDermott

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

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Contents at a Glance

Introduction	1
Part 1: Let's Get This Country Started	5
CHAPTER 1: Aussie, Aussie, Aussie.	7
CHAPTER 2: First Australians: Making a Home, Receiving Visitors	23
CHAPTER 3: Second Arrivals and First Colonials	33
CHAPTER 4: Colony Going Places (With Some Teething Troubles)	53
CHAPTER 5: A Nation of Second Chances.	71
Part 2: 1820s to 1900: Wool, Gold, Bust and then Federation	89
CHAPTER 6: Getting Tough, Making Money and Taking Country	91
CHAPTER 7: Economic Collapse and the Beginnings of Nationalism.	115
CHAPTER 8: The Discovery of Gold and an Immigration Avalanche	133
CHAPTER 9: Explorers, Selectors, Bushrangers ... and Trains	155
CHAPTER 10: Work, Play and Politics during the Long Boom	179
CHAPTER 11: The Economy's Collapsed — Anyone for Nationhood?	197
Part 3: The 20th Century: New Nation, New Trajectories	221
CHAPTER 12: Nation Just Born Yesterday	223
CHAPTER 13: World War I: International and Local Ruptures	243
CHAPTER 14: Australia Unlimited	263
Part 4: 1930 to 1949: Going So Wrong, So Soon?	287
CHAPTER 15: A Not So Great Depression	289
CHAPTER 16: World War II Battles	311
CHAPTER 17: Making Australia New Again	335
Part 5: 1950 to 2000: Prosperity and Social Turmoil	351
CHAPTER 18: Ambushed — by Prosperity!	353
CHAPTER 19: Taking Things Apart in the 1960s and 1970s	371
CHAPTER 20: When Old Australia Dies ... Is New Australia Ready?	389

Part 6: 2000 and Beyond: Seeking Solutions to Global and Local Problems	411
CHAPTER 21: Into the New Millennium	413
CHAPTER 22: Facing Off Between Two Australias	425
Part 7: The Part of Tens	451
CHAPTER 23: Ten Things Australia Gave the World	453
CHAPTER 24: Ten Game-Changing Moments	457
Index	463

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
About This Book	1
Foolish Assumptions	2
Icons Used in This Book	3
Where to Go from Here	4
PART 1: LET'S GET THIS COUNTRY STARTED	5
CHAPTER 1: Aussie, Aussie, Aussie	7
When Oldest Meets Newest	8
Getting ahead in the convict world	8
Leaping into the big time with wool	10
Gold, Gold, Gold for Australia	10
Welcoming in male suffrage	11
Striving for the 'workingman's paradise'	12
Solving the Problems of the World (By Keeping Out the World)	14
Now for War, Division, Depression and More War	15
Joining the Empire in the war	15
Dreaming of 'Australia Unlimited'	16
Getting hit by the Great Depression	17
... And another war	17
The Postwar Boom Broom	18
Breaking Down the Fortress Australia Mentality	19
Opening up the economy	19
Opening up the borders (mostly)	20
Entering the New Millennium	20
CHAPTER 2: First Australians: Making a Home, Receiving Visitors	23
Indigenous Australians	24
Settling in early	24
Life in Aboriginal Australia	26
History without books	28
Trading with the neighbours	29
Visitors from Overseas	30
Macassan fishermen	30
Portuguese and Spanish navigators	31
Lost Dutch traders and wandering explorers	31

CHAPTER 3: Second Arrivals and First Colonials	33
‘Discovering’ the Great Southern Land	34
Finding the right men for the job	34
Setting (British) eyes on New South Wales	36
The Brits are Coming!	37
Quick! New settlement required	37
Pushing for a settlement in NSW	40
Picking a winner: NSW it is!	41
Sailing for Botany Bay	44
Getting there with the First Fleet	44
The human material: Who were these people?	45
Holding Out at Sydney	46
Using convicts as guards	46
Issuing ultimatums (and being ignored)	47
Soldiering on regardless	47
New Colony Blues	48
Second Fleet horrors	48
Courting disaster with the interlopers	49
Bennelong and Phillip	50
Then the rest of the world goes bung	51
CHAPTER 4: Colony Going Places (With Some Teething Troubles)	53
Rising to the Task: The NSW Corps Steps Up	54
Setting up trading monopolies	56
The ascendancy of the ‘Rum Corps’	56
Upsetting the reverends	57
Ruling with Goodhearted Incompetence: Governor Hunter	58
Ending the trading monopoly game	59
A government store with empty shelves	60
Handing out land higgledy-piggledy	60
Hunter’s wheels fall off	62
King Came, King Saw, King Conquered — Kind Of	62
Diversifying trade and production	63
Ending the rum trade (well . . . points for trying)	64
Pardoning convicts	65
Fixing up the mess	65
Choosing Bligh for the job	66
Bligh gets down to business	66
Bligh’s end	68
CHAPTER 5: A Nation of Second Chances	71
Macquarie’s Brave New World	72
Converting Macquarie	73
Living under the Macquarie regime	74

Macquarie's Main Points of Attack	75
Pushing expansion	76
Conciliating (and pursuing) Indigenous Australians.	78
Re-ordering a town, re-ordering convict behaviour.	79
Becoming a Governor Ahead of His Time	81
Stirring up trouble with the free folk	81
Creating outrage back home.	82
Big World Changes for Little NSW.	83
Coping with the deluge following Waterloo.	83
Britain starts paying attention again (unfortunately!)	83
Bringing back terror	84
Big Country? Big Ambitions? Bigge the Inspector? Big Problem!	85
Recognising Macquarie's Legacy.	86

**PART 2: 1820S TO 1900: WOOL, GOLD,
BUST AND THEN FEDERATION. 89**

CHAPTER 6: Getting Tough, Making Money and Taking Country.	91
Revamping the Convict System.	92
Putting the terror back into the system . . . and the system back into the terror	93
Bringing in the settlers	93
Bringing in the enforcers	94
Getting Tough Love from Darling	95
Running into staffing issues.	95
Going head-to-head with the press	96
Coming up against calls for representation	96
Putting it all down to a personality clash.	98
Enduring Tough Times from Arthur	99
Concentrating on punishment and reform	99
Recording punishments in the system.	100
Fighting bushrangers and Tasmanian Aboriginals	101
Hitting the Big Time with Wool and Grabbing Land.	104
Opening up Australia's fertile land	106
Adding sheep, making money	107
Clashing with the locals: white pioneers, black pioneers	109
Fighting the land grab.	110
CHAPTER 7: Economic Collapse and the Beginnings of Nationalism	115
Bubble Times: From Speculative Mania to a Big Collapse.	116
Working the market into a frenzy	116
Investing in land with easy credit	117
Ducking for cover as the economy collapses	119
Picking up the pieces after the implosion	120

Moving On from Convictism	121
British calls to end convict ‘slavery’	121
Ending transportation to NSW	122
Feeling the effects of ending transportation	123
Van Diemen’s Land hits saturation point	123
Feeling the First Stirrings of Nationalism	124
Britain tries turning the convict tap back on	124
Britain offers exiles instead	125
Protecting Indigenous Australians — British Colonial Style	128
Attempting to protect Aboriginal peoples	128
New possibility on Merri Creek	131
Same old tragedy on Myall Creek	132
CHAPTER 8: The Discovery of Gold and an Immigration Avalanche	133
You want gold? We got gold!	134
Discovering gold (and going a little crazy)	134
Introducing order and hoping for calm	136
Adding a gambling mentality to the mix	137
Working Towards the Workingman’s Paradise	138
That Eureka Moment	140
Rumblings of discontent	141
Tensions boil over	141
The Arrival of Self-Government	144
Votes for a few men	144
Votes for many men	144
Suffrage goes rogue	147
Unlocking the Arable Lands	149
Moving the squatters	149
Making new laws for new farmers	151
Dealing with squatter problems	151
Facing up to non-squatter problems	152
CHAPTER 9: Explorers, Selectors, Bushrangers . . . and Trains	155
Explorer Superstars	156
Seeking thrills in the ‘great unknown’	156
. . . Then making the unknown known	157
Sturt and Leichhardt Go Looking	158
Sturt — have boat, will walk	159
Leichhardt also walks . . . right off the map	160
The Great Race — Stuart versus Burke and Wills	161
Seeing the back of Burke, losing Wills	161
Super Stuart — just a pity he’s drunk	163
Selectors and Bushrangers	165

	Moving on from the selectors' dust heap	166
	Bushranging nation	167
	Ned Kelly: Oppressed Selector's Son? Larrikin Wild Child? Stone-cold killer?	171
	Kelly's key events	172
	The man in the iron mask	174
	Growing Towards Nationhood . . . Maybe	175
	A telegraph to the world	175
	It's raining trains	176
CHAPTER 10:	Work, Play and Politics during the Long Boom	179
	The 'Workingman's Paradise' Continues	180
	Growth brings jobs	180
	Workingwomen's paradise too	181
	Workers' Playtime	182
	Beating the English at cricket	183
	New codes of football	183
	The Big Myth of the Bush: Not So Rural Australia	185
	Rearranging the Political Furniture	186
	Charting new colonial directions	187
	Intervening in the economy	192
CHAPTER 11:	The Economy's Collapsed — Anyone for Nationhood?	197
	From Boom to Bust	198
	The bubble before the pop	198
	And now for a big collapse	199
	Three strikes and we're out — industrial turmoil	203
	Birthing the Australian Labor Party	205
	From little things	206
	Two Australian halves of a Labor story	206
	Labor politicians and Labor unionists — the struggle begins!	207
	New Nation? Maybe. Maybe Not.	209
	Why Federation happened	209
	How Federation happened	212
	Three men who made Federation happen	217
	PART 3: THE 20TH CENTURY: NEW NATION, NEW TRAJECTORIES	221
CHAPTER 12:	Nation Just Born Yesterday	223
	Advancing Australia: A Social Laboratory	224
	Defining the Commonwealth	225
	What the judges said	226
	What the politicians did	226
	What everyday people thought	227

Passing Innovative Legislation	228
Franchising Australian women	229
Establishing bold new protection	231
Deciding on a fair and reasonable wage	232
Voting in Labor	233
That Whole White Australia Thing	234
Passing the Immigration Restriction Act	235
Promising ‘protection’ — and delivering the absolute opposite	236
Excluding Chinese Australians	238
Dealing with the ‘piebald north’	239
Deporting the ‘Kanakas’	240
Pushing ‘purity’	241
CHAPTER 13: World War I: International and Local Ruptures	243
Gearing Up for Global War	244
Building up Australian forces	245
Choosing the best party to lead the wartime government	245
Why get involved?	246
Australia at War	246
Proving ourselves to the world, part I: Gallipoli	247
Proving ourselves to the world, part II: The Western Front	249
General John Monash engineers some victory	251
Home Front Hassles	253
Getting on the war footing	254
Irish troubles	254
Conscription controversy	257
When Billy goes rogue — aftermath of the Labor split	260
Moving the Pieces around the Global Table: Australia at Versailles	262
CHAPTER 14: Australia Unlimited	263
Expanding Australia	264
Postwar Australia — from sour to unlimited	264
Postwar blues? Take the ‘Men, Money and Markets’ cure	266
Australia Not-So-Unlimited	272
Borrowing unlimited for little Australia	272
Land disasters	273
Schizoid Nation	274
Sport, the beach and picture shows	275
Cars, radios and Californian bungalows	275
Returned soldiers — elite, but angry	276
The race bogey	280
The Workers of Australia	280
Labor turns hard left	281
Labor in state governments	282

An attack of the Wobblies	282
Bruce arbitrates his own destruction	283
PART 4: 1930 TO 1949: GOING SO WRONG, SO SOON?	287
CHAPTER 15: A Not So Great Depression	289
Crash and Depression	290
Borrowing like there's no tomorrow	290
Here comes tomorrow	291
The man from the Bank (of England)	291
The Melbourne Agreement	292
A(nother) Labor Split	293
Two different solutions for the Great Depression problems	293
A party shoots itself in both feet	295
Lang sacked and Labor in tatters	297
Threats to Democracy from Best Friends and Enemies	300
Seeing the virtues of communism	300
Forming secret armies	301
Mistakes and Resilience through the Crisis	304
The politicians fail	304
The people endure	306
Celebrating 26 January 1938? Yes. Mourning and Protesting? Also yes	307
CHAPTER 16: World War II Battles	311
Building Up to War	312
Defences through the Great Depression	312
Embracing the Singapore Strategy	313
Belatedly prodded into action	314
Dealing with Early War Problems	315
Problems with tactics and technology	316
Problems with officer training and promotions	316
Problems with weapons	317
Overseas Again	317
War in northern Africa	317
War in the Mediterranean	319
This Time It's Personal: War in the Pacific	319
Britain can't do everything: The fall of Singapore	320
Attacks on Australia	321
Um, America — can we be friends?	323
Turning the tide in the Coral Sea and on the Kokoda Trail	323
Jungle victories	327
Petering into significance	328

	Tackling Issues on the Home Front	329
	Industrialisation and business expansion	329
	Rationing and control	330
	Women in war times	331
	Taxing everyone and building a welfare system	332
CHAPTER 17:	Making Australia New Again	335
	Restarting the Social Laboratory Under Chifley	336
	Chifley's Postwar Reconstruction	337
	Focusing on public works and welfare	337
	Developing the public service	338
	Increasing legislative interventions	340
	Coming up against High Court troubles	340
	Calwell and the Postwar Migration Revolution	341
	Looking beyond Britain to meet migration needs	342
	Breaking the mould of mainstream Australia	342
	Shifting Balances with Foreign Policy	345
	Giving a voice to all nations in the UN	345
	Choosing between America and Britain	346
	Treading On an Ants' Nest — of Angry Banks	347
	Taking a tentative step	347
	Going full-steam down the nationalisation road	348
	 PART 5: 1950 TO 2000: PROSPERITY AND SOCIAL TURMOIL	 351
CHAPTER 18:	Ambushed — by Prosperity!	353
	Economics of the Postwar Dreamtime	354
	Developing industry and manufacturing	354
	Accepting 'new' Australian workers	355
	Indigenous Australians push back against new policies	356
	Suburbia! The Final Frontier	359
	White goods make good friends	359
	New neighbourhoods and isolation	360
	The Rise and Rise of Bob Menzies	361
	Appealing to 'the forgotten people'	361
	Appealing to women	362
	Appealing to everyday freedoms	363
	Tackling the Communist Threat	365
	Menzies tries to ban the Communist Party	365
	A man called Petrov and another Labor split	367
CHAPTER 19:	Taking Things Apart in the 1960s and 1970s	371
	Moving On from Empire	372
	Still loving Britain	372
	Losing Britain all the same	373

Looking to Japan and America	374
Defending Australia . . . with America	375
Attack of the Baby Boomers!	377
Ending White Australia	377
Gaining rights for Indigenous Australians	381
Fighting for women's rights	383
Crashing — or Crashing Through — With Gough	383
It's (finally Labor's) Time!	384
The Whitlam typhoon	385
When the wheels fall off	387
CHAPTER 20: When Old Australia Dies . . . Is New Australia Ready?	389
The Coming of Malcolm Fraser	390
Launching the good ship Multi-Culti	391
Fraser foiled! By shifting economic sands	392
Deregulation Nation	394
Welcoming in 'Hawke's World'	394
Feeling the effects of short-term excess	397
Deregulating the labour market	399
Fighting the Culture Wars	400
Keating fires the starting gun	401
Bumps on the multi-culti road	402
Howard versus the 'brain class'	403
Pauline Hanson enters the debate (and turns Howard's head)	405
Battling Over Native Title	406
Acting on the Mabo judgement	406
Panicking after the Wik judgement	407
PART 6: 2000 AND BEYOND: SEEKING SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL AND LOCAL PROBLEMS	411
CHAPTER 21: Into the New Millennium	413
Still Dealing with the Outside World	414
Protecting the borders	414
Flashpoint Tampa	416
Dealing with the Bali bombings	417
Facing Up to Challenges at Home	418
Apologising to the Stolen Generations	418
Creating more wealth for more people	419
New political directions	421
CHAPTER 22: Facing Off Between Two Australias	425
A Dozen Years with a Changing Beat	426
The Australian Cavalcade of Events	428

Revolving the door for prime ministers	428
Turnbull's time	431
Turnbull undone	435
Believing in election miracles.	436
Tackling Three Seriously Significant Issues	437
That big China question	437
The People versus Big Tech	439
The People versus COVID.	440
Leaders, Politics, Culture and Two Australias	444
From tribe to brand.	444
Politics? Downstream of culture	446
Culture? Downwind of politics.	446
PART 7: THE PART OF TENS	451
CHAPTER 23: Ten Things Australia Gave the World	453
The Boomerang	453
The Ticket of Leave System	454
The Secret Ballot	454
The Eight-Hour Day	454
Feature Films	455
The Artificial Pacemaker.	455
The Practical Application of Penicillin.	455
Airline Safety Devices	455
Permaculture	456
Spray-on Skin	456
CHAPTER 24: Ten Game-Changing Moments	457
Cook Claims the East Coast of Australia	457
Henry Kable Claims a Suitcase — and Rights for Convicts	458
Gold Discovered	458
Women Get the Vote in South Australia and Federally	459
Building a Fortress out of Australia — the White Australia Policy	459
Australia splits over Conscription	460
Australia on the Western Front	461
The Post-World War II Migration Program	461
Lake Mungo Woman.	461
Mabo	462
INDEX	463

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, I've taught history, studied history, written history, talked and listened about it with all sorts of different people, learning all the time. What's struck, and stayed with me through this whole time, is just how big the for good history is. And good history, in my own frankly biased opinion, generally involves helping people answer some of the really compelling questions. Questions like, who are we, really? (And, sure, are we even a 'we'?) And how did we come to be as we are now, today? History can be as small as what's happened over a few decades on one neighbourhood street, but no matter how small its immediate subject matter, if it's good history, it can't help but relate back some sort of answer for the big questions too. The reason there's a history profession at all is because there's enough folks who want to know the answers to these questions, and want their kids to know, and their friends, relations and various others to think and ask these questions too.

Now, obviously there is no one final, finished ultimate set of answers to these questions. That's the beauty of history for me — with every year and decade that passes, from one generation to the next, our view of the past changes. In this sense I like to think of history as one great big ongoing conversation between the past and the present. And the conversation keeps changing and evolving and shifting as the society it's in keeps changing with it. At the heart of this changing, ever-shifting conversation though, is the need in us to tell each other the basic story, as clearly and as well as possible. And providing that story is what this book is all about.

About This Book

At first glance, Australian history appears to be nice and neat and compartmentalised, doesn't it? There it is, most of it fitting into the last 230+ years (aside, of course, from the 50,000 years or more of Indigenous Australian history that preceded it, but we'll get to that). So it can be positively weird just how often bits of it get sliced, diced and served up as completely different dishes. 'First contact' history gets separated out from Gallipoli, say; the conscription controversy of World War I and the Vietnam War might get placed in separate boxes; convicts are set aside from the rise of colonial towns and cities; and it's all completely separate

from the Great Depression. From the Tent Embassy and Gough Whitlam's 'It's Time!' election win in 1972, to John Howard, Julia Gillard, Asylum seekers, Carbon tax and Same Sex Marriage since the 2000s.

Okay, this separation isn't always a bad thing — they're all good topics worthy of being teased apart in isolation. But it can be useful — not to mention interesting! — to also have them available to a reader in one easily accessible, easily readable volume, and this is where the *For Dummies* books shine.

You might want to read the whole of Australian history from go to whoa — from first Indigenous arrivals to practically just last week. With this book, you can do that. Or, this month, you might want to find out what caused separate, self-sufficient colonies to federate into a nation but, next month, be wondering exactly how a supposed convict hellhole managed to create a 'workingman's paradise' within 70 years of first settlement. You can dip, you can skip, you can cross-reference — jump from one item to another as you see fit. The book is designed to work the way you want it to.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing the book, I've been making some assumptions about what you as a reader might be bringing to the book. I've been assuming that you want to know more about Australian history, and that some or all of the following might apply to you:

- » You might have done some Australian history at school, but in a hodgepodge sort of way. At different points of your schooling, you might have bumped into convicts, bushrangers, Gallipoli and other different topics. These interested you at the time but you weren't quite sure how they all fitted together, and what else there was to know about.
- » Alternatively, you might have *hated* history at school and tried to ignore it as much as possible. But you've always suspected that the actual history of the place might be a darn sight more interesting than what school history did to it, and wondered what that history might look like.
- » You might be entirely new to Australia and keen to get inside the head of the country, and understand what makes the place tick, and how it came to be this way.

I've also used a few conventions in this book to make the information easy to get to and understand:

- » *Italics* for terms or words that might not be immediately understandable (and I follow the italics up with an explanation in brackets like this one).
- » Sidebars for things that are interesting in their own right but are a little removed from the main point.
- » The spelling of 'Labor' for the Australian Labor Party. Officially, the spelling was standardised by the party in 1912 to be Labor rather than Labour (although plenty of newspapers ignored this and kept spelling it the old way until after World War II ended in 1945). To make it simpler, I've spelt it the same way — 'Labor' — all the way through.
- » The description of the main non-Labor political party as 'Liberal' for pretty much all of the 20th century. Even though the final reorganisation of the party into the Liberal Party we know today only happened in 1944, a non-Labor party acted like the Liberal Party, and really was the Liberal party, and sometimes even called itself the Liberal Party, ever since Alfred Deakin got the various liberal forces together under the one banner in 1909. Rather than change the name to reflect the various name-changes they went through over the next 30-odd years (which they did with irritating frequency), I've just chosen to call the lot of them Liberals and be done with it.

Icons Used in This Book

Along with the parts, the chapters and the sections in this book, something else should make your navigating through it a whole lot easier: Different icons placed at different points in the margin of the text to highlight some key things. I've used the following icons:



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

The main events, decisions and actions in a country's history don't usually just happen — you can often dig up their causes and influences from the past. When I've done this for events in this book, I've labelled the information with a 'Historical Roots' icon.



IN THEIR
WORDS

This icon, I confess, is a special favourite of mine. These are the moments in the book where I get to hand over the metaphorical microphone to the people who made Australia's history and give them the chance to explain what they thought they were doing — or to contemporary commentators, to explain what Australia was thinking when these events happened. For all the explaining that an historian does (and I promise you I've tried to make it as clear and to the point as I possibly can) sometimes there's just no substitute for getting the actual protagonists or observers to have their say on what was going on. When they do, it carries this icon next to it.



LIFE DOWN
UNDER

This flags things in Australian history that go directly to explaining the distinctive society that we can recognise today as tellingly Australian.



REMEMBER

These are the bits that, if books came with batteries, would flash and buzz 'Important!' when you got near them. These are the things that give an essential understanding of exactly how or why Australia has developed the way it did, and by keeping them in mind, you'll never lose your historical bearings.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This icon highlights further information, such as statistics, that can deepen your understanding of the topic, but aren't essential reading. Read the information so you have some extra facts to impress your mates with, or feel free to skip it.

Where to Go from Here

The short answer to this, of course, is the beauty of a Dummies book — anywhere! Anywhere at all you darn well please. You can start at the start and motor along right through the various parts until you get down to the contemporary scene, or you can just jump to a point that explains what you really want to know about right now. If you want to see exactly what Australia did with its new federated nation powers after 1901, then Chapter 12 at the start of Part 3 is your next stop. If you want to see the colonial world that emerged in the wake of the massive gold finds of the 1850s, then Chapter 8 is a good place to start. If the very first years of convict settlement make you curious, head for Chapter 3, with the following decades of settling in and teething troubles also worth checking out in Chapters 4 and 5.

Remember that aside from the table of contents, you've also got an index that alphabetically lists the main events and subject areas. Using all this, you can go pretty much anywhere in Australian history without having to wait around to be told which parts should be considered before first, second and 23rd. It's there for you to read and use when you need it, as you see fit.

1
**Let's Get This
Country Started**

IN THIS PART . . .

Find out more about Australia's unlikely set of origins and why the highly problematic mix of Indigenous Australians and newly arriving British settlers was not one that spelt much in the way of recognition, respect or rights for the Indigenous peoples.

Discover why the new colony of Australia unexpectedly became a place to start again for the convicted criminals, soldiers and officials who arrived here.

Understand why by the time British authorities got around to noticing the widespread laxness in their convict colony, it was too late — the ex-cons had already established themselves as major players in Australian life.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Considering the realities of Australia's Indigenous and convict origins
- » Seeing the transformation created by the discovery of gold
- » Creating an 'ideal' society after Federation
- » Getting knocked around by two world wars and a Great Depression
- » Growing up and making changes with the baby boomers
- » Opening up Australia's economy and its borders
- » Seeing in the new millennium

Chapter **1**

Aussie, Aussie, Aussie

The first thing about Australian history that probably strikes you — aside from the very obvious exception of millennia of successful Indigenous adaptation — is that practically all of it is modern history. Getting your head around Australian history — what the big events were, and what the major forces shaping people's actions, reactions and various ideas were — means you also get your head around the major shifts and changes of the modern era. Australian history provides an invaluable window onto the flow of the modern era, while also being a pretty interesting story of the emergence of a distinctive nation in its own right.

The contrast between Australia being home to one of the longest continuing societies and most people thinking of Australian history in terms of only recent events is one thing. But another striking thing about Australia is that it is a land

and society of many more contrasts. The country was colonised as a place to punish people, yet being sent here often turned out to be the convicts' greatest opportunity. Australia was a place where British convicts were sent to be deprived of their rights, yet was one of the first places to bestow on men an almost universal right to vote (and, a few decades later, to almost all women). And, after Federation, Australia was set up as something of a 'new society,' yet was one that refused entry to non-Brits for most of the 20th century. The playing out of these contrasts adds to the depth and colour of the Australian story.

When Oldest Meets Newest

Australian modern history largely begins with the strange encounter between the oldest continuing culture in the world and the most rapidly changing one. The first Australians were Indigenous Aboriginals (see Chapter 2 for more on their way of life pre-European settlement). They were brought into contact with an invading group of settlers from an island on the other side of the world and off the west coast of Europe — Great Britain.



IN THEIR
WORDS

Explorer James Cook had been given a secret set of instructions to open only after he'd done his scientific work in Tahiti: Search for the elusive *Terra Australis Incognita*. If he found it, according to the instructions, he was then to 'with the consent of the natives take possession of convenient situations in the name of the King . . . or if you find the land uninhabited, take possession for His Majesty'.

Cook found the land inhabited — he even observed that, despite their apparent material lack, Aboriginals may be the happiest people on earth — but he then went ahead and claimed possession of the whole east coast of Australia anyway. As far as intercultural harmony went, this set an ominous tone for how Australia's first inhabitants would be viewed by the colonisers. Britain established the convict colony of New South Wales (NSW) shortly after. (See Chapter 3 for more on Cook and the decision to settle NSW.)

Getting ahead in the convict world

If I say to you the words 'convict colony', certain mental images probably automatically flash up. Chances are, they'd be pretty grim 'hellhole'-type images: A basic slave society with clanking chains and floggings.

Setting up a penal colony on the other side of the known world, with minimal chance of convicts returning to Britain once they'd served their time, certainly sounds like a recipe for disaster. But this is where the story of Australia gets interesting.



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

According to English law, criminals usually lost most of their legal rights after being convicted for a crime — and they lost them permanently. They couldn't own property. They couldn't give evidence in court. If the original colony planners or early governors had really been set on making life in NSW as miserable as possible for transported convicts, the scope was there. But that's not what happened at all. In the new settlement, convicts not only kept their rights — they could own property, and could sue and give evidence in court — but they also became major economic players.

Convicts were allowed to retain legal rights and were given plenty of opportunities partly out of necessity: They were the vast majority of the population. How do you run a society where some 80 to 90 per cent of people can't hold property or talk in court? Convicts were the labour force (and the police force!), and they were the tradesmen and a large chunk of the entrepreneurial class. If you wanted to get anything done in this strange new colony, you had to see a convict about it. Indeed, if you wanted a *date*, you needed a convict. Most of the soldiers and officials had come out without womenfolk. While the soldiers and convict women entered into common-law partnerships (or de facto marriages), plenty of officers had relationships where convict women were their lovers and mistresses, sometimes even setting them up in businesses, having families and children with them, and occasionally even marrying them.



LIFE DOWN
UNDER

Economically, the new colony offered plenty of opportunities to make money, especially in importing and exporting — and, most notably, trading in alcohol for a very thirsty populace. Military officers, convicts and ex-convicts were all quick to get in on the act. None of them was super-scrupulous about how they did it, either.

By a weird quirk of fate, which neither transportation's administrators nor its detractors wanted publicised too much, getting caught, convicted and transported for crimes committed in Britain in the late 18th or early 19th centuries was frequently the luckiest break a criminal ever scored. (See Chapters 4 and 5 for more on the opportunities and second chances offered to new arrivals in NSW.)

Eventually, Britain got around to designing and building proper convict hellholes — at Port Arthur, Norfolk Island, Moreton Bay and Macquarie Harbour (see Chapter 6). But that took decades, and life in these places was never the reality for the majority of convicts.



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

The myth of NSW as a convict hellhole was at least in part a creation of free settlers. In the 1840s, plenty of now successful free settlers wanted to separate their new home from the stigma of convict association, so they dwelt on the horror of the exceptional places and practices — the chain-gangs, the isolated outposts designed for severe punishments — as if they were the usual thing. They weren't. But they created a myth that still shapes our thoughts about convict life.

Leaping into the big time with wool

At first, NSW was a trading and maritime colony. In 1808, 20 years after first settlement (and about the same time Governor Bligh was arrested by an extremely irritated populace — see Chapter 4) the population of the main port town, Sydney, was about half that of the entire colony. In the 1820s and 1830s, a real foothold finally started to be put down on the broader continent because of one main factor — the take-off of wool.

Australia's south-eastern grasslands, the end product of millennia of firestick farming burn-offs by Aboriginals (performed to attract kangaroos and other game to the new-growth grassland), were discovered to be perfect for grazing sheep on. And sheep grew wool. And wool was just what the new textile industries of Britain's industrial revolution wanted a lot of. (See Chapter 6 for more on the prosperity brought about by sheep farming and the land grab that followed.)



Not for the last time, Australia's jump into big-time prosperity had everything to do with high demand for raw materials from a nation flexing its muscles as a newly arrived industrial giant. (America, Japan and China would all play similar roles at different times in the 20th century.) Not for the last time, either, would a massive inward surge of investment capital make for a leveraging up of debt levels that meant when crunch time came, as crunch time tends to do, bankruptcies started popping up like toadstools everywhere (see Chapter 7).

Gold, Gold, Gold for Australia

At the end of the 1840s, Australia and the world were emerging from economic depression. Then along came the discovery of gold to dazzle everyone. The idea of getting your very own hands on a jackpot of wealth was what brought men and women to Australia in their hundreds and thousands in the 1850s, making for a transformation of colonial society.

Gold, an insanely profitable export, started being shipped out of the country, filling the treasuries of newly self-governing colonies as it did so. (This was in the days before Federation, when the states that now make up Australia acted as independent colonies.) And those who were lucky enough to have found gold and were newly cashed up had no shortage of things to spend their money on, as imports started flooding in. (See Chapter 8 for more on the gold rush and its effects.)

A building boom also followed. While the massive surge of new arrivals was happy enough to live in tents and canvas towns for the first few months, and makeshift shelters, shanties and lean-tos for another few years after that, ultimately they

wanted to live in proper houses — which all had to be built. As did roads. And schools for all the children being born. Then railways, telegraphs — why not?! ‘If the world has it, we shouldn’t lack for it’ was the generally agreed sentiment (see Chapter 9). Limitless progress, development and prosperity were there to be enjoyed. The newest inventions and technology were certain requirements as the ‘steam train of progress’ of the 19th century took off with rattling speed, with the colonies demanding to be in the front carriage.

Welcoming in male suffrage

Democracy was another accidental by-product of the gold rushes — although, at this stage, for ‘democracy’ read ‘votes for most men’. The Australian colonies were some of the very first places anywhere in the world to grant practically universal male *suffrage* (voting rights). (And, 40 to 50 years later, Australia would be one of the very first places to give votes to almost all women.)



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

The granting of the right to vote to most men in the 1850s was one of those sublimely unexpected twists in Australian history. In Britain at the time, constraints were placed on who qualified for the *franchise* (that is, who was allowed to vote). Traditionally, those who owned large amounts of property or paid big amounts of rental qualified to vote. When Australian colonies were granted elected Legislative Councils, constraints similar to those operating in Britain were put in place. But what members of the British parliament didn’t know was that rents were much, much higher in Australian cities. Thanks to gold, everything had shot up — prices, wages, rents, the lot. Without realising it, the British parliament had set constraints that allowed a much higher proportion of men to vote than in Britain. So, without great agitation or publicity campaigns or fanfare, practically all men got the right to vote in elections that formed the colonial governments. Politicians changed their pitch and their promises accordingly. (See Chapter 8 for some of the initial political effects of the more universal male suffrage.)



LIFE DOWN
UNDER

Even after winning the vote, it seemed that many people in the colonies didn’t really *care* about politics. They hadn’t come here to vote, after all. They’d come here to get rich. And the ‘native-born’ white settler Australians were notoriously unconcerned about political life. Many newly arrived British immigrants were veterans of the great political struggles of 1840s Britain. They complained that all the locals seemed to care about (and here you’d better brace yourself for a bit of a shock) was making money, getting drunk, racing horses and playing sport. How un-Australian can you get?! Wait, better not answer that . . . (See Chapters 8 and 10 for more on how new immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s influenced colonial politics.)

So it turns out plenty of defining Australian characteristics were embedded in the culture of the place from very early on. What many people in the colonies wanted most tended to be plenty of leisure time to do with as they saw fit (see the sidebar ‘The great Australian leisure time experiment’).



LIFE DOWN
UNDER

THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN LEISURE TIME EXPERIMENT

In the period of the long boom that followed the gold rushes in Australia, one of the things that people began pushing for was more leisure time. The eight-hour working day movement was very successful (see Chapter 8), and workers often showed that if they had to choose between more pay (and more working hours) and less pay (and fewer working hours), they would choose the latter.

With this leisure time, many Australians started passionately playing sport and games. In 1858, what became known as Australian Rules, a uniquely colonial code of football, was developed. (In all likelihood, this code drew on an Indigenous game, perhaps Gaelic football and definitely the still-developing British codes of rugby and soccer). In 1861, the Melbourne Cup, the renowned ‘race that stops the nation’, started stopping the nation, with the race results being telegraphed to the rest of the colonies. By 1879, Melbourne Cup Day was a public holiday in Melbourne (as it still is today). From 1865, rugby was being played regularly in Sydney. (See Chapter 10 for more on the use of leisure time during the long boom and the development of different football codes in different colonies.)

Cricket was played everywhere, including by Indigenous Australians — with the first Australian cricket team to tour England being made up of 13 Aboriginal men. The (white) colonials proved so adept at picking up the game that they were able to defeat English teams first in 1877 in Melbourne then in 1880 in London. This provoked shock and consternation among the English, and some wag placed an obituary in the papers for English cricket, which, the obituary mockingly declared, had died at the Oval — its body was to be cremated and the ashes sent to Australia. These mythical ‘ashes’ of English cricket have been at stake in The Ashes series of test cricket matches between England and Australia ever since.

The crowds that came to watch these burgeoning spectator sports — particularly Australian Rules and the Melbourne Cup — showed a distinctively colonial disregard for old world rigid class distinctions. Workers, business owners, bankers and farmers, men and women — all mingled freely and barracked loudly.

Striving for the ‘workingman’s paradise’

From the early 1850s through to the late 1880s, Australia went through a long boom, and it was during this period that the phrase ‘workingman’s paradise’ first began to be regularly applied. Obviously, a fair bit of grandiose hyperbole is associated with the phrase (hello — *paradise?!!*) but it also contained an important element of truth.



Life for workers in Australia was dramatically better than what they were used to in Britain and other parts of the world. With all the demand for building, construction and the rest, unemployment was largely non-existent, the eight-hour day became almost the norm and pay rates were generally good. In Australia, an ordinary white male worker could work and put enough away in savings to eventually buy his own house — an impossible dream for most workers in Britain.

During the long boom, schooling began to be supplied by the state. It was compulsory (which had the effect of eliminating child labour) and *secular* (non-religious) to avoid playing favourites with the different religious denominations of different immigrants from Britain. Most remarkably of all, the schooling was free. Parents from all different classes started sending their children to the same schools, which had been precisely the legislators' intent. (See Chapter 10 for more on the politics and social reforms made during the 19th century long boom.)

For as long as the boom period sustained itself, the occasionally mentioned desire for *federation* — uniting the various self-governing colonies into one nation — struggled to gain much traction. Different citizens in different colonies would at times talk about intercolonial union, and politicians held tentative conferences. However, for as long as the passionate central beliefs of colonial Australia — progress, ever-increasing material wealth and chasing after the various luxury consumer goods that go with it — were able to be maintained, it was hard to stir up sufficient enthusiasm.



WAIT A SECOND! WHERE ARE THE EXPLORERS AND THE BUSHRANGERS?

Most people come to Australian history with a few embedded expectations. They expect convict life to be one of unremitting hell. (Refer to the section 'Getting ahead in the convict world', earlier in this chapter, for how that one works out.) They also tend to think of colonial Australians as, if not explorers, gold diggers or bushrangers, at least living out on the backblocks of a ruggedly frontier life, struggling as *selectors* (farmers of small parcels of land) to eke out a barren existence on bad soil, or wrestling rams and clipping ewes as shearers. And, certainly, some people did things exactly like that, but most colonial Australians didn't. The most remarkable thing about colonial Australia, really, was not the exotic figures — the bushrangers, the explorers and so on — but how extraordinarily similar most people's lives were to what we're familiar with today.

Now, if you really like the explorers and bushrangers, don't worry! They're here in *Australian History For Dummies* also. Anyone who wants the lowdown on Burke and Wills, Ben Hall or Ned Kelly will be kept happy (see Chapter 9). But there's also the other question — what were most colonial Australians doing? The big unexpected answer is that by the 1860s, most Australians were living in the colonies' urban centres.

Luckily (for the future prospects of Australian federation), a devastating economic crash hit the colonies hard in the 1890s. The idea of inevitable progress, increased prosperity and constant social harmony was set firmly back on its heels, and a federated nation became much more attractive (see Chapter 11).

Solving the Problems of the World (By Keeping Out the World)

When depression hit in 1891, the sustaining ideas of the long boom — of ever-increasing abundance, technological advancement and continued riches — came undone. The assumption that old-world problems such as class antagonism had been solved turned out to be untrue, as seen in a series of savage strikes that broke out in the early 1890s — on the docks, in the shearing sheds and in the mines of Broken Hill. The various progressive colonial governments came down on the side of the bosses, sending in troops to maintain order and protect the rights and property of bosses and owners. ‘So much for the workingman’s paradise’, said the workers. ‘So much for social harmony and real progress’, said the middle class.



In the end, the middle classes had supported the decision of governments to send in troops against strikers to keep order and maintain public safety. However, they were furious about having to make such a choice at all. Colonial Australia wasn’t meant to be like that: Most people in Australia had spent 30 or so years proudly boasting that Australia was far too progressive to let things like that happen.

From the widespread disillusionment felt by many during the 1890s depression, a series of new factors emerged:

- » The union movement, which had seen its power largely broken in the strikes, decided it was time to form a political party, get voted into government and change the laws themselves to make them friendlier to workers. From this ideal, the Australian Labor Party was born (see Chapter 11) and, by the end of the first decade of the 1900s, had established itself as the dominant force in Australian politics.
- » Federation, the idea of forming a new country out of the old self-governing colonies, took on a new momentum after being kickstarted at the ‘people’s convention’ at Corowa on the Murray River in 1893. Federation succeeded largely as a powerful symbol of new unity — ‘a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation’ — which would help colonial Australians move beyond the divisions and struggles that had so divided sections of the community in the 1890s (see Chapter 11).