

Preface

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Dominions Apart: Reflections on the Culture of Science and
Technology in Canada and Australia 1850-1945

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Preface

How did scientific activity in colonial ‘settler’ and frontier societies differ from science as practiced in the European metropolis? Are there identifiable stages in the development of scientific institutions along the path to colonial independence, and are they comparable across time and geography? In May 1981, a conference devoted to Scientific Colonialism, jointly sponsored by the US National Science Foundation and the Australian Department of Science and Technology, exchanged ideas on this theme. Scholars from Australia, the United States and Canada reflected on the usages of imperial language, the significance of distance, and the vitality of locality. Several papers outlined the contingent history of science as experienced by different countries with a colonial past. As an exercise in international comparison, this proved highly fruitful. But the process left unanswered a great many questions, especially in relation to the many different political contexts within which colonial scientific developments historically occurred.

In the belief that comparisons between predominantly English speaking ‘settler colonies’ in certain areas of science could be both interesting in themselves, and more plausible than comparisons between wholly dissimilar colonial environments, we proposed a meeting to share and compare the experience of science, technology and science-based industry in nineteenth-century Australia and Canada — two former colonies, Dominions, and federal nations, huge in dimension and vast in resources, middle-range in economic development, yet small in European population, with significant indigenous communities, enormous environmental opportunities, and cultural, political and economic ties to both Britain and the United States.

This proposal led in July 1990 to a workshop at Dunsmuir Lodge, in the University of Victoria, where six Canadians were paired with six Australians on six themes and disciplinary areas of mutual interest — the physical sciences, geology, anthropology, chemical industry, scientific institutions, and defence. The essays in this collection are the result. After much revision, some have taken the form of bilateral comparisons, while others have chosen to focus on national dimensions. One (by Nancy Christie) was commissioned after the conference, to enlarge our spectrum of subjects. In Victoria, several Canadian scholars provided commentaries on the papers, and we would like to thank in particular Professors Raymond Duchesne of the Université du Québec, Elvi Whittaker and Steve Straker of the University of British Columbia, and Bill Glover of Royal Roads Military College in Esquimalt, British Columbia. Superb local arrangements were provided by Professor David Zimmerman. Our thanks also go to Dr Alan Batten of the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory for conducting a tour of that historical institution.

The workshop was sponsored by the Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association and we acknowledge with thanks its financial contribution, as well as that of York University. Funding was also provided by the Strategic Grants Programme of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, without which it would have been impossible to realise our ambition of bringing together, however tentatively, Australian and Canadian scholars in what we hope will not be the last attempt at cooperative and comparative research in the history of science.

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