

challenged the prevailing controllers of wealth and power. The strength of markets as appropriate mechanisms for the distribution of scarce resources was implicitly being challenged.

The costs of the growth of the economies seemed as though it was a cost that was bearable. The response time of the world's ecological systems to the stresses to which they were subjected was, at first, slow and unpredictable. The response time of the world's political systems was also slow. It was as though national leaders believed that if the challenge was ignored, it would go away. Some of those who recognised that the challenge was real nonetheless held the view that we could put a price on the environmental externalities created by the pursuit of growth and offered the comforting argument that they could all be held in check by establishing appropriate markets.

Kerryn Higgs has done us all a great service in writing *Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet* in the way she has patiently, and in meticulous detail, reviewed the socio-political context in which the idea that there may be a social limit to growth was articulated. The story told here is one of the evolution of an idea, how it was challenged, which political and intellectual interests and values were addressed and how different scholars from a wide range of disciplines and different political and social interests joined the debate. The response to *The Limits to Growth* was more a melee in which powerful elements of the world's academic communities and those in control of the nations' resources felt threatened than a sober exchange or examination of alternative explanations of emerging natural phenomena.

Higgs has shown us that we can get past the present tendency to build protective boundaries (silos) around our various disciplines and has reminded us that the desire to know the nature of things must inevitably include a development of our understanding of their social and economic nature. She has given us a scholarly work which is at once balanced and yet incisive. This book may be seen as an excellent illustration of the way we must encourage scholars to focus on the history of ideas. Its lessons are applicable to the evolution of ideas in the 'natural sciences' but it is also a splendid illustration of the utility of such ideas in the social sciences that must include the dismal one.

Higgs' gentle, thoroughly researched, insightful book could easily become a foundation text in history, philosophy, economics, politics and, of course, in the biological sciences. All university and public libraries and indeed the members of all political and social institutions who wish to be taken seriously in debates about our future should read and discuss this work if we are to avoid the collision for which Higgs suggests we are on course.

Quentin Beresford, *The Rise and Fall of Gunns Ltd*, NewSouth Publishing: Sydney, NSW, Australia, 2015; 448 pp.: 9781742234199. RRP: AUD\$32.99.

Reviewed by: Michael Hess, *UNSW Canberra, Australia*

In the economic history of post-settlement Australia, narratives of businesses based in extractive industries and analysis of the policies which have supported them play a significant role. It could be expected that a 'rise and fall' approach to one of our largest forest product companies would make an important contribution to business history.

Despite some shortcomings, this is certainly the case with this book as there is considerable detail about the last years of Gunns on which further analysis could be based. For readers who don't know much about the Tasmanian forestry wars, Beresford's work will provide plenty of information. For others, it makes an interesting contribution to an on-going and often heated public debate.

Founded in 1875, Gunns Ltd became the largest woodchip exporter in the Southern Hemisphere. From 2006, the company was embroiled in an environmental controversy over forest management practices and a proposed pulp mill. Following heavy losses after 2006, the company was placed in voluntary administration in 2012. The narrative of events in Beresford's book is presented from an openly political position and although perhaps that should be expected from a Professor of Political Science, it might have added to the force of the argument if this position had been made explicit. As it is the implicit view underpinning the argument descends at times to a simplistic picture in which conservation is seen as the major imperative of political life. Hence those who support this view are the good guys while those who don't vary from incompetent to criminally corrupt. So for readers with an established opinion in relation to the forestry wars, this book is likely to either confirm an existing bias or provide something to grind your teeth over.

For scholars, the book presents a mixed bag. The cover page comment that it is 'a tale that needed telling' seems indicative, as the focus is firmly on the 'tale' rather than on the details of company history. This strong story line moves the book along nicely, but there are some sacrifices in the process. One is that for a substantial work by a university professor addressing issues of public debate, remarkably little attention is paid to epistemology. Major sources are media reports, press releases of major players and interviews with a few players from the anti-Gunns side of the fence. There is little evidence of an attempt to check the veracity of sources and the selective use of supportive quotations, in which the source is infrequently mentioned and its credibility rarely explained, detracts from the value of the book as scholarship.

In fact most of the book is about the forestry wars and the company's role in them rather than the history of the company itself. This will certainly make the book more attractive to non-scholarly readers and has already given it some local fame or notoriety, depending on your view. As well as engaging readers at this level of public controversy, where many will have at least some familiarity with the events it describes, Beresford's narrative has the additional advantage of being easily read. It is, however, more likely to fuel the opinion-based arguments which characterise public discussion of forestry than to make an intellectual contribution to resolving them. It is hardly surprising that this is more likely to be the case in Tasmania where such opinions are now hard wired into well-established political sub-cultures.

What Beresford describes is a story of opportunity, risk-taking and initiative on the part of a Tasmanian company which, under a particular style of leadership, became extremely ambitious and eventually over-reached itself. Comments on the role of the narcissistic chief executive officer (CEO) are clever and it would have been interesting, from a scholarly viewpoint, to see this analysis extended. Relationships with regulators attract more particular attention. The enthusiasm of the latter to facilitate the company's ambitions is presented as a corruption of their legitimate purpose. The fact that this

enthusiasm was shared by State and national Governments is likewise presented as undermining policy processes. Beresford makes no claim that this is an unusual story but particularly in the context of Australian settler capitalism, it would have been interesting to consider some comparative analysis. Is this a story very different from 19th-century pastoral enterprises or 20th-century mining companies? Perhaps we can look forward to this sort of extended analysis in later more scholarly publication.

For readers not familiar with the events of the forestry wars, this book is well worth reading. For those who are, or who look for a practical compromise, there is food for thought, which will repay the effort of wading through this opinionated version of the controversy. For me, one of the most valuable sections deals with Gunns' involvement in managed investment schemes. In the early 2000s, with public attention firmly fixed on the good times of the mining boom funding the tax cuts of an over-confident federal Government, these ponzi schemes received top level policy support. Even as our political representatives trumpeted their support for small investors, many of the latter were defrauded in disasters such as those of Timbercorp and Great Southern. In public discussion, we seem to have forgotten this story and it is well presented here. Another example of Beresford's contribution in reminding us of outrageous political conduct is the account of the approach of federal politicians to Tasmanian forestry issues in the 2004 election campaign which saw any possibility of reaching a solution to protect local employment sacrificed to expedite electoral success.

The Rise and Fall of Gunns Ltd should be compulsory reading for those with an interest in Australian economic and policy history. There is also more than enough in it to amuse students of the frailty of human nature. For the sake of the scholarship, which is somewhat buried in the book, it is to be hoped that the author follows it up with some more detailed analysis in which scholarly conventions receive closer attention.