

Kerryn Higgs, *Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA and London, 2014; 416 pp.: 9780262027731 (hardcover), RRP US\$29.95.

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It was only a matter of time before someone took over from where *The Limits to Growth* left off.

When it first appeared in 1972, the study by Meadows et al. attracted a baleful response from conventional economists whose nostrums for and pontifications about the nature of contemporary society appeared to be built on fundamental truth. The recovery from the Great Depression and the rebuilding of the very fabric of the countries that had been directly engaged in World War II sustained a massive increase in the wealth of nations which, however, appeared as though it might be better shared. The policies and programmes articulated by the new priests and handmaidens offered simple solutions to the challenges of a new international economy and a more interconnected social and economic life. Their understanding appeared to provide a satisfactory explanation of the way wealth could be created and shared compared with the earlier highly hierarchical organisation within and between nations.

Moreover, there seemed to be no end to nature's bounty. We could do anything we wanted. All we had to do was reach agreement on how it could be shared. In Australia, we told the world we could do it fairly.

Our social organisation was seemingly unbounded and we collectively (and generally enthusiastically) supported and benefited from a new realisation that we had the capacity to materially improve the life experience of most, if not all, people. This was heady wine. We became intoxicated. The new wonder drug was called 'GROWTH'. It could seemingly cure anything including problems of maldistribution. Like the magic pudding, we could 'cut and come again'. We even sang about it in our national anthem telling ourselves that if we were prepared to toil for it, there was enough to share and, more than that, we could generously treat those who came to join us in the endeavour.

As in all good fairy tales, there was a dark side to our over-indulgence. The ecosystem of the world was left out of the story. Soon enough, however, a handful of scholars, from overseas observing some of the consequences of growth on the 'natural order', questioned whether we really did have 'boundless plains'. They were not making explicit criticism of the Australian way but were drawing on the new science of systems analysis to explain that the various perturbations and sub-system failures being observed in the 'natural world' were the consequence, ultimately, of over consumption. They drew attention to the fact that, when over-stressed, natural systems could, indeed often did, decline and collapse. They argued that there was a limit to the stresses which whole ecosystems, or critical elements of them, could bear without collapse. That is, they argued that there was a limit to the growth in stresses to which the physical environment could be subjected.

The developing science grounded in observation and testing of hypotheses was seen as a challenge to the existing order and was fought by it. At times the proponents of the need for restraint and for better sharing of the world's ecosystem resources were characterised as deviant radicals. For some, they were seen as no better than those who

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.

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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.