
The Royal Society of Tasmania

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In 2024, the Royal Society of New South Wales published its history, written by Anne Coote.¹ In my review of the book for the RAHS *Journal*, I commented that:

Coote demolishes the persistent myth that The Royal Society of New South Wales (RSNSW) was the first 'Royal Society' in Australia ... Instead, she clearly identifies that its foundation was the Philosophical Society of New South Wales in 1856 which in 1866 became RSNSW ...²

While historians are no longer as preoccupied with 'firsts' as once they were, Coote's book was appreciated in Tasmania where the actual first Australian Royal Society, the Royal Society of Tasmania (RST), was founded in 1843 and is acknowledged to be the oldest Royal Society outside the United Kingdom.

A claim to such historical significance is perhaps surprising in the small colony of Van Diemen's Land (VDL) which in 1835 had a population of only about 36,500 (about 14,000 in Hobart) and 70,000 in 1850. As a convict colony, continuing to receive convicts for a decade after transportation to New South Wales ceased in 1840, the free citizens of VDL were keenly aware that they were a small elite in a society made up largely of convicts and their descendants. It was also a period when identification and discovery of the 'natural history' in this 'new' part of the world was of intense interest for scientific and economic purposes. In this context, the existence of a sophisticated scientific and intellectual society had extra pragmatic value and cachet, and in both New South Wales and VDL there were short-lived organisations in the 1820s and 1830s.

Even in Tasmania there has been some confusion about early organisations and when the RST was founded. A number of writers have conflated RST with the earlier Tasmanian Society which was established in 1838 by Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Franklin and his dynamic wife, Lady Jane Franklin. Its purpose was to promote the study of natural history in VDL. It operated for a few years, meetings often chaired by Franklin who was President, its members demonstrating specimens and presenting papers on their discoveries, some of which were published in a journal.³

This all changed after 14 October 1843 when Franklin's successor, Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Eardley-

Wilmot, convened a meeting of gentlemen at Government House who agreed to the formation of the Botanical and Horticultural Society of Van Diemen's Land. Its principal purpose was to take over operation of the botanic gardens that had been established in 1818 near Government House, but the Society was also intended to assist in the identification and development of the natural resources of the island. Its purposes stated, 'That the leading objects of the Society shall be to develop[e] [sic] the physical character of the Island, and illustrate its natural history and productions'.⁴ The Governor was to be President, although the actual administration would be undertaken by four Vice-Presidents and a Council. Those elected as members would be known as Fellows. Eardley-Wilmot arranged an annual grant to support its work.

Remarkably, through Eardley-Wilmot's influence, on 12 September 1844 it was announced that Queen Victoria had consented to become Patron of the Society and its name changed to the Royal Society of Van Diemen's Land for Horticulture, Botany, and the Advancement of Science.⁵ Meanwhile, the Tasmanian Society carried on until 1848 when it folded and its members were absorbed into the Royal Society.⁶

During the 1850s, with encouragement and support from the next governor, Lieutenant-Governor Sir William Denison, the Royal Society became increasingly active and membership grew to 330 in 1854.⁷ While the administration of the botanic gardens was a major focus, the Society was increasingly absorbed by the issues captured in the second part of its long title, the advancement of science. It held regular meetings at which papers were read on a very wide range of subjects, principally about new discoveries and identifications which demonstrate the unfolding understandings of the natural world in the colony.⁸ Many of these were reproduced in the Society's annual *Papers and Proceedings* which has been published without interruption since 1851.

As the University of Tasmania was not founded until 1890 there were few Tasmanians who could be called professional or academic scientists. Rather, scientific investigations were essentially undertaken by relatively well-off enthusiasts with sufficient leisure time to devote to the pursuit of knowledge. Although amateurs, some were skilled, respected and well-



Royal Society of Tasmania Museum, ca. 1878, by C. Woodhouse, lithographer, from Thad W.H. Leavitt, Jubilee History of Tasmania, 1887. Libraries Tasmania.

connected in the external scientific world. These were the people – essentially men – who led and did the work of the Royal Society.

However, another literally extraordinary aspect of the Society was that Clause VIII of the Rules approved at its first meeting in 1843 declared, ‘Ladies may be admitted as Fellows upon the same terms, with the same privileges, and under the same Regulations in all respects as Gentlemen’.⁹

In this the VDL Society was following the earlier example of the Tasmanian Society which allowed women members and their contributions, but otherwise it is challenging to find any equivalent organisation that offered female membership until at least late in the nineteenth century or well into the twentieth century. (The RSNSW did not admit women until 1935.) At the meeting of the VDL Society on 7 December 1843, among several men nominated to be Fellows of the Society there was also a woman, Mrs Louisa Bell. She was confirmed as a Fellow at the meeting on 4 January 1844.¹⁰ Thereafter women members were few and far between until the twentieth century, although whether by choice or social prejudice is not clear.

Nevertheless, women made donations of specimens,

paintings and drawings to the Society’s collections. In the later years of the century a few women wrote papers that were read to meetings for them, and in 1881 artist Louisa Anne Meredith became the first woman to be awarded Honorary Membership. Today, the gender balance in all activities is roughly equal.

Until the 1880s the RST was the colony’s principal collecting institution. Natural history enthusiasts were typically keen to read about work in their fields from across the Empire and to collect specimens for examination and local exhibition. Consequently, the development of a library and a museum became major elements in the work of the Society.

To house these the Society moved between inadequate premises until in 1860 the government granted it a block on the corner of Argyle and Macquarie Streets in Hobart. In 1861–63 public subscription and government contribution paid for a new building designed by prominent local architect, Henry Hunter. It was a relatively large, two-storey building with spacious areas including three exhibition galleries and a combined library/meeting room. A visit to the museum became a popular activity.¹¹

The RST operated in this way until 1885 when the government took over the botanic gardens and the

museum, and the museum building. Legislation established two new authorities although the RST retained an important role in the operation of the museum for many decades through representation on its Board of Trustees.¹²

The 1885 Act also provided for the RST to retain and develop its library:

... the books, manuscripts, pictures, engravings, maps, philosophical apparatus, bookcases, furniture, goods, and chattels contained in the Library of the Museum, being the property of the Royal Society ... shall remain the absolute property of such Society ... the Society shall have exclusive possession of the Library Room of the Museum, or other sufficient and convenient rooms therein ...¹³

To enable expansion of the museum the government erected a substantial extension in Argyle Street that opened in 1889. Since then the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) has expanded to take over all the heritage buildings in the city block. The space allocated to RST by TMAG has shrunk over the intervening decades but the RST lecture room and office are still located in the complex.

The Society's library grew into what is now a highly prized collection of nineteenth and early twentieth-century scientific literature, numbering some 8000 books, 60 historically significant maps and 1450 journal titles including an extensive collection of scientific journals from organisations with which RST had an exchange programme. However, the housing and running of such a large collection would eventually prove to be beyond the capacity of a voluntary organisation and in 1969 the collection, together with the Society archives, was agreed to be housed and administered by the University of Tasmania library in its Special Collections. The collection is still on loan to the University library and remains the property of RST.

In the mid-nineteenth century the Society also began in a small way to collect artworks, with an emphasis on Tasmanian botanical and faunal depictions and landscapes. After the separation of the museum in 1885, the art collection became more important and it expanded to well over 900 works, many of which are highly valuable. RST also collected historically and culturally significant Tasmanian material including many photographs. The art collection is now accessible for research and appreciation via eHive¹⁴ and Trove. It is



Library and Members Room, Royal Society of Tasmania, 1902, taken by John Watt Beattie, photographer. Royal Society of Tasmania collection.

physically on loan to TMAG, under a similar arrangement to that with the University of Tasmania library.

From the 1840s regular lecture meetings covered a wide range of scientific subjects, complemented for a few decades from the 1890s by several Sections in which members could discuss more specialised disciplines in the increasingly sophisticated scientific world.¹⁵ A Northern Branch was formed in Launceston in 1853, became defunct in the 1870s but in 1921 was re-formed and remains active.¹⁶

Until 1914 the RST focused essentially on the sciences but in that year it was decided to broaden the scope and to adopt as its purpose 'The Advancement of Knowledge', covering the arts, humanities and other disciplines of knowledge. In this the RST is unusual as the other Royal Societies in Australia have continued with science as their central focus.

The RST has not been without controversy, both in the nineteenth century and in recent times. From the 1860s to the 1890s some of its members were involved in the 'repatriation' and trade of the skeletons of the Indigenous people of Tasmania. The last people of fully Tasmanian descent were perceived to be dying out and when William Lanne died in 1869 and Truganini in 1876, it was generally believed that the Tasmanians were 'extinct' (a belief now refuted).

To collect, preserve and exhibit the skeletons of the Indigenous people was considered by some to be a legitimate anthropological pursuit, although others condemned it as morally questionable, especially the theft and dismemberment of people who had recently died. Some members of the RST were involved in this collection and trade, out of a mixture of scientific interest and professional and commercial benefit, and the RST acquired some skeletons for its own collection. In 1885 these were transferred to be part of the government museum's collection.¹⁷ Tasmania's Indigenous descendants and other Tasmanians are understandably very critical of such collecting practices and in 2021 RST and TMAG arranged a ceremony at which they presented separate heartfelt apologies.¹⁸

RST is now more than 180 years old and in pursuit of 'the advancement of knowledge' maintains programmes of lectures, dinners, exhibitions, publications, awards to scholars and other functions. It is a respected institution that has made significant contributions to the heritage of Tasmania.

About the Author

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University for many years. He has published seventeen books and has been extensively involved in voluntary cultural heritage organisations. He now lives in Hobart.

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