

Journal and Proceedings of The Royal Society of New South Wales

Volume 118 Parts 3 and 4 [*Issued March, 1986*]

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“Scientific Sydney” - Introduction

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[Introduction to Seminars held in Joint Meetings with the Royal Australian Historical Society, 1984-1985]

As we approach the celebrations of the Bicentennial Year, few subjects can be at once so highly important, yet least understood, than the history of Australian science. A country which depends on so many ways upon the application of knowledge has, in the sciences, an enviable heritage. That heritage, the cultural legacy of our colonial past, is significant to both our sense of nationhood and our spirit of internationalism. Today, scholars are acquiring the materials that will give us a firmer grasp of those factors which directed the pursuit of knowledge in the early years of the settler colony, and which have ever since shaped the character of our scientific enterprise.

In this task, co-operation between historians and scientists is essential. Technical expertise must be matched by historical perspective; institutional folklore must be placed in broader context; biographical anecdote must be sifted and weighed against comparative records. “Metropolitan” zeal for laboratory research must be juxtaposed against field traditions, and the image of science as a metaphor of reason and enlightenment must be qualified by its use as a “tool of empire”. Above all, the economic and intrinsically political character of science in a new land of settlement must be understood. Science, like architecture, has shaped our lives, and we must now look more closely at its fine structure.

Rising to this challenge, the Council of the Royal Society of New South Wales, in collaboration with the Royal Australian Historical Society, agreed in 1984 to hold at “History House” a series of exploratory workshops devoted to the historical reconstruction of “Scientific Sydney”. This series began in November, 1984, with a day devoted to “Artisans and Managers: Technical Education in New South Wales, 1884-1984”. In the event, this occasion celebrated the centennial of the Sydney Technical College, and the sesquicentennial of the Sydney Mechanics’ School of Arts. Both these institutions cooperated fully, as did the Technical and Further Education Department of New South Wales which is soon to constitute its own museum in the city.

This first meeting, to which seven papers were delivered, was so well received, that it was followed in May 1985, by a day devoted to “Culture and Learning in the Colonial Metropolis”. This second meeting heard five papers, of which three are presented in the following pages. Abstracts of all papers of both meetings are included as Appendices to this note.

In November, 1985, our third and, arguably, our most successful workshop to date was held to commemorate the centenary of Professor John Smith, foundation Professor of Chemistry and Experimental Philosophy at the University of Sydney. The papers from that session, as edited by myself, will be the basis of the next issue of the *Journal and Proceedings*.

To the Royal Australian Historical Society, go our warm thanks for their hospitality and enthusiasm. To Ms Christa Ludlow, go the thanks of all concerned with the series' organisation. And to the Royal Society of New South Wales, which enjoys a premier place in the history of science in this country, goes the appreciation of all who rejoice to see the treasures of "Scientific Sydney" thus re-discovered and made public.

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