

**Symposium – Commemorating Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane,
National Trust, Observatory Hill, 1 December 2011**

Sir Thomas Brisbane – Patron of Colonial Science

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Abstract

British Army officer Sir Thomas Makdougall Brisbane was sworn in as Governor of New South Wales on 1 December 1821. His appointment allowed him to pursue his plans for astronomical observations of the southern sky by setting up an observatory near his residence at Government House Parramatta. He also joined the Philosophical Society of Australasia and became Patron of the newly formed Agricultural Society of New South Wales. These societies were the precursors of many important later professional bodies, so that Brisbane's connection with them represents his most important contribution to Australian science.

Introduction

On 1 December 1921 Major-General Sir Thomas Brisbane was sworn in as the sixth Governor of New South Wales.

Lachlan Macquarie was still occupying Government House in Sydney Town, so Brisbane and his entourage settled in what is now known as Old Government House at Parramatta. Governor Brisbane found this location so congenial that his family decided to reside there after Macquarie returned to London early the following year.

Like Macquarie, Thomas Brisbane was a Scot and an army officer, differentiating them from the first four governors who were all officers in the Royal Navy.

How did this come about? Thomas Brisbane came from an ancient landed family in south-west Scotland, at one stage owning 10,000 acres of grazing land. Over succeeding generations with large families to support this inheritance was gradually dissipated, so that the children were expected to be independent

– a good marriage for the girls; a career in the army, or sometimes the navy, for boys. Governor Brisbane's father and grandfather (both also named Thomas) were educated and well-read men – products of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment. Young Thomas was born at Brisbane House in 1773, where he was taught first by a governess then by his father and a local clergyman. At the age of fourteen he was sent to school in London to study the subjects that a young gentleman needed, including mathematics, as well as to soften his Scots brogue.¹

At sixteen, he commenced his pre-destined military career as an Ensign in the 38th Regiment. He enjoyed the army, and his family purchased promotions for him, while he served on several overseas appointments

¹ The information about Brisbane's early life is largely based on C. Liston, 'Sir Thomas Brisbane', in D. Clune and K. Turner (eds.), *The Governors of New South Wales*, Federation Press, 2009. See also C. Liston, 'Sir Thomas Brisbane in New South Wales', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 71, 2, Oct 1985, pp91-106.

until 1802 when he could not accept a posting to India because of health problems. He was then placed on half-pay while he helped manage his father's estate in Scotland. This gave him the opportunity to develop an interest in astronomy that had arisen from his posting to Jamaica some years earlier when the voyage almost ended in disaster due to poor navigation. While in the West Indies he acquired some instruments and began reading widely about navigation and astronomy. Back home he built an observatory at Brisbane House, which he fitted out with specially designed instruments. This was only the second observatory to be built in Scotland. (Rosen (2003), Morrison-Low(2004). He began an active correspondence with leading astronomers, one of whom was married to a cousin in Edinburgh, and in 1810 he was elected as a member of the Royal Society in London.

Living the lifestyle of a gentleman of leisure, and indulging in a very expensive pastime while on reduced salary from the army strained his resources and he was forced to borrow large sums of money. Relief came when he was recalled to active service as a Brigadier-General in the Peninsula War against Napoleon, where he distinguished himself and was knighted. During the occupation of Paris, Brisbane prevented the destruction of the *Académie des Sciences*, and in gratitude was elected an honorary member of that body. This connection enabled him to broaden his interests through contact with the leading French astronomers, and he remained a dedicated Francophile.

After the war, he returned to his estates, which were now so heavily encumbered that it was necessary to sell half the land. Rescue came when at the age of 46 he married another cousin, Anna Maria, whose father provided a generous financial settlement. In

return he formally adopted the cousin's surname, and thereafter became Sir Thomas Makdougall Brisbane. They moved to Ireland where he was appointed to the military staff before being nominated as Governor of New South Wales. Thomas Brisbane had been angling for this position since at least 1815, when he wrote to the Duke of York stating that he wanted to carry out astronomical observations in the colony, in particular to ascertain the shape of the earth. At this time the stars in the southern hemisphere were little-known. He even contemplated chartering a ship privately, and by 1817 he had already purchased astronomical instruments in anticipation. Another attraction of an appointment as Governor was the salary of \$2000 per year, but he hastened to assure the colonial authorities that he would not neglect his Vice-regal duties while pursuing his astronomical investigations.

Living at Parramatta had an additional enticement for Brisbane. Government House was situated on a small hill with a clear view in all directions, and without the smoke from fireplaces that polluted the atmosphere in the port of Sydney. It was an ideal location for his planned observatory.

Brisbane's arrival in the Colony was welcomed by the small group of men interested in the natural sciences who earlier in 1821 had formed the Philosophical Society of Australasia, "with a view to inquiring into the various branches of physical science of this vast continent and its adjacent regions; and the mineralogical and geological state of these countries". At this time, the total white population of the Colony was about 31,500 including children. Nearly 14,000 of the population – just under half – were convicts. Of the free settlers and military personnel,

6,300 were adult men.² Only a small number of these would have the time, money or inclination to devote to matters of the mind, so the new Society was a select band.

The members were keenly interested in the rocks, plants and animals in their new environment, so met once a week at each others' homes in rotation to discuss their discoveries, and to exchange books from their personal libraries. The Society asserted its exclusive status and serious purpose by penalising members the substantial sum of £10 (\$20) if they failed to present a scientific paper on the allotted monthly date, and they were fined five shillings (50 cents) if they arrived more than fifteen minutes late for the weekly meeting. Emphasising their seriousness of purpose, refreshments were limited to a cup of tea and a biscuit. Members also contributed £5 (\$10) each towards the cost of establishing a small museum and library at the Colonial Secretary's office, which eventually became the nucleus of the Australian Museum in College Street. So, by joining this group, Governor Brisbane indirectly became the founding patron of the Museum.

The original members of the *Philosophical Society of Australasia*, as they styled themselves rather grandly, are shown in Table 1.

Of these ten, Governor Macquarie had already identified four as troublesome and dissatisfied, together with nine other leading settlers, in his despatches to London dated the day before he left office.³ Undoubtedly he cautioned his successor to be careful of these men, in particular Judge Field, whose name was vigorously underlined three times by Macquarie. Two other members of the anti-Macquarie faction also had been

invited to join the Society, but declined— Dr Robert Townson, a distinguished scholar who was the only “real” scientist in the colony, but was preoccupied with his pastoral interests, and Rev Samuel Marsden, who was in dispute over other matters with the secretary of the Society, Dr Douglass. Macquarie described Samuel Marsden as “discontented, intriguing and vindictive” and refused to see him except on official occasions.

	PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY MEMBER	OCCUPATION	MACQUARIE'S OPINION
1	Alexander Berry	Surgeon; landowner	
2	Dr James Bowman	Medical practitioner	“Dissatisfied”
3	Dr Henry Douglass	Medical practitioner	
4	Judge Barron Field	Supreme Court judge	“Dissatisfied”
5	Major Frederick Goulburn	Colonial Secretary	
6	Dr Patrick Hill	Medical practitioner	
7	William Howe	Farmer and magistrate	“Dissatisfied”
8	Captain Francis Irvine	Army officer; farmer	
9	Lieutenant John Oxley	Surveyor, explorer	“Intriguing & discontented”
10	Edward Wollstonecraft	Merchant (brother-in-law of A. Berry)	

Table 1: The original members of the *Philosophical Society of Australasia*

Governor Macquarie had not been invited to join the Society. The Governor's willingness to meet with emancipist former convicts alienated him from the “exclusives”. Macquarie was a practical man, a builder and explorer, rather than a thinker and observer like Brisbane. Macquarie was at best a dilettante and not a serious collector (despite the beautiful chests of local curiosities that he took home with him, and which are now treasured artefacts of the Mitchell Library).

In November, soon after Sir Thomas Brisbane arrived in the Colony, the

² *Australians. Historical Statistics*, Sydney, 1988, p104.

³ L. Macquarie, Memorandum, 30 Nov 1821. Mitchell Library, A.772.

Philosophical Society wrote to the Governor-designate:

*Individuals of this Colony, anxious to obtain information, in the several branches of science and natural history, which this extensive and interesting quarter of the globe offers to industry and research, agreed to meet and form a Society for the attainment of that sole object ... I am directed, Sir, to express the anxious wish of this Society, that you would accept the Presidency of their infant body ...*⁴

Although he may have felt some reservations based on Macquarie's warning, Brisbane responded from Government House, Parramatta, the following day, 16 November, a fortnight before he was sworn into office:

*I ... beg you will express how highly I appreciate this mark of their [the Society's] consideration, and which I shall accept with much pleasure, although with much deference, arising from the humble opinion I entertain ... of my own talents to do justice to such situation ...*⁵

Brisbane attended his first meeting at Dr Douglass's home in Parramatta on 2nd January 1822, just over a month after he arrived in the Colony. To balance the numbers in a potentially awkward political situation, he arranged for two of his personal staff to join as well – his wife's personal physician, Donald Macleod (1799?-1851), and his German-educated astronomer, Christian Carl Ludwig Rümker (1788-1862). At this meeting, Barron Field read a paper on the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land. No doubt Brisbane found this an interesting introduction to his new responsibilities. The Society then decided, probably at their President's instigation, that it would send quarterly meteorological tables and astronomical observations to the twenty

overseas scientific societies with which it already had established correspondence.

One of the first objectives of the Society had been to place some memorial to James Cook and Joseph Banks near the spot where they first landed in Botany Bay in 1770. They decided this should take the form of a brass plaque attached to the rocks; wording for the inscription caused debate over several months, even as to whether it should be written in Latin or English. At least, now that the Society had a distinguished President, his name could be included as well. He was asked to nominate a date for a little ceremony, and to join the other members for "a little collation on the spot".⁶

Their first attempt to mark the occasion was abandoned, owing to "the perils of the seas", but on Wednesday, 20th March, the President and members of the Society were taken to "the South head of Botany Bay" by the crew of *HMS Dauntless*, when the plaque was "pinned and soldered into a beetling rock, twenty-five feet above the level of the sea," where it remains today, at a place known as Inscription Point at Kurnell.⁷

The hydrographer Captain Phillip Parker King (1791-1856) joined the Society later, so that by May 1822 there were fourteen members of the Philosophical Society. King was the only Australian-born member, but as the son of former Governor Philip Gidley King, he could be expected to support Governor Brisbane and the Vice-Regal establishment (although his support evaporated later). The members were all relatively young men, with Thomas Brisbane

⁶ Minutes, *op.cit.*, 23 Jan 1822.

⁷ *HMS Dauntless* was an armed sloop of 422 tons, under the command of Captain George Gambier, then refreshing in Sydney on the way from Peru to India with specie.

⁴ Minutes, Philosophical Society of Australasia, 11 Nov 1821. State Records NSW, SZ1007.

⁵ Minutes, *op.cit.*, 21 Nov 1821.

the oldest, aged 48. Because Brisbane's other astronomical assistant, James Dunlop (1793-1848), was an artisan of humble birth and little formal education, he was not invited to join the gentleman members of the Society, and probably would not have been comfortable in their company.

Sir Thomas attended most meetings, and he invited the members to a dinner at Government House on 3 July 1822, to mark the anniversary of the foundation of the Society.⁸ Here the guests were able to enjoy a repast prepared by Brisbane's French chef, and listen to a piano recital by their colleague Carl Rümker and Brisbane's sister-in-law Elizabeth. Yet after the meeting six weeks later on 14 August, there are no further entries in the Minute Book; the Society appears to have disbanded, although some writers have suggested that it was still functioning in 1824, but I can find no evidence of this.⁹ We know from other accounts that relations between the Governor and Colonial Secretary Goulburn had deteriorated. According to Judge Barron Field in his *Geographical Memoirs on New South Wales* in 1825, the society "soon expired in the baneful atmosphere of distracted politics, which unhappily clouded the short administration of its President" (Field (1825)). Judge Field himself may have been part of the problem, as hinted by the *Sydney Morning Herald* which wrote that "it appears from the available evidence, that the struggle between the Governor and the judiciary caused the early demise of the organisation" (SMH (1921a)).

Or perhaps it was Barron Field's own execrable verse that led to the collapse! He wrote this sonnet after the trip to Kurnell to fix the commemorative plaque:

Here fix the tablet. This must be the place
Where our Columbus of the south did
land;

He saw the Indian village on that sand
And on this rock first met the simple race
Of Austral Indians; who presum'd to face
With lance and spear his musket¹⁰

Despite his assurances to the Colonial Office, Brisbane obviously came prepared to devote considerable time to astronomy. He considered Parramatta to be "the Greenwich of the Southern Hemisphere" (Proudfoot (1971)). His instruments were set up at Parramatta almost as soon as he arrived, in order to observe the summer solstice in December (Wood (1951)). Indeed, ninety years ago this month, on 17 December 1921, the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced that members of the Royal Society of New South Wales and the British Astronomical Association gathered at this same site to celebrate "the foundation of accurate astronomy in Australia" a century earlier (SMH (1921b)).

Two months after he arrived in the Colony, *The Australian Magazine* reported in its issue of February 1822 that:

His Excellency Sir Thomas Brisbane has prepared a most important and valuable Paper, entitled 'A Particular Table of Equations to Equal Altitudes, for Sydney, New South Wales ...' A few copies of this scientific work are now going through the Australian press – 'As it is universally admitted, by all astronomers, that the method of equal

⁸ Minutes, *op.cit.*, 1822.

⁹ Professor John Smith, in his Anniversary Address as President of the Royal Society of NSW in 1881, states that there is a reference to the Philosophical Society in the *Australasian Almanac* for 1825, but not afterwards.

¹⁰ B. Field, *Sonnet. On visiting the Spot where Captain Cook and Sir Joseph Banks first landed in Botany-Bay*, published 1825.

*altitudes combines the greatest simplicity with the utmost accuracy in determining time ...*¹¹

A rigorous program of celestial observations commenced in April 1822, and the team very quickly made their most notable discovery, the return of Enke's comet, only the second comet to have its return successfully predicted in advance (Pickett & Lomb (2000)). Following a number of other significant observations at Parramatta, Brisbane was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Society in London. It is not surprising that the Governor was accused unfairly of spending his nights looking at stars and his days chasing parrots, as he pursued that favourite pastime of the landed gentry – hunting.¹² On the other hand, Brisbane and his family remained aloof from Colonial society, which caused some resentment for precisely the opposite reasons that some members of the “bunyip aristocracy” disliked Macquarie.¹³

The grateful governor granted Rümker 1,000 acres of land at Picton as a reward. Twelve months later he deserted his job at the observatory and moved to his new rural property which he named ‘Stargard’ after the town in Germany where he was born. Brisbane was furious, and tried to revoke the land grant. Relations between the two men collapsed (Bergman (1960)).

Perhaps the Philosophical Society's aims were too abstract for Sydney in the 1820s. As the *Sydney Monitor* editorialised:

Zoology, Mineralogy, and Astronomy, and Botany, and other sciences are all very good things, but ...

¹¹ *The Australian Magazine*, II, 10, Feb 1822

¹² *Historical Records of Australia*, Series 1, Vol.11, p612.

¹³ “Bunyip aristocracy” was the term used by writer and politician Daniel Deniehy to ridicule W.C. Wentworth's proposal for a hereditary peerage to be included in the NSW Constitution.

an infant colony cannot afford to become scientific for the benefit of mankind. (Gasgoine (2002))

Even before the final recorded meeting of the Philosophical Society, eleven of its fourteen members were involved in the formation of the Agricultural Society of New South Wales on 5 July 1822. There had been an earlier attempt to form an agricultural improvement society in 1818, but this failed because Governor Macquarie insisted that emancipists should be accepted as members (SMH (1918)). The new society became a distant forebear of the present Royal Agricultural Society. Somehow overcoming their differences, Judge Barron Field became President, with Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane as Patron, and Colonial Secretary Frederick Goulburn as Vice-Patron. Again it was an exclusive group because of the high subscription fees. It was a quasi-scientific body, albeit with a more explicitly practical rationale than the Philosophical Society. Its prospectus pointed out that “Agriculture and Grazing, in a soil and climate so peculiar as those of New South Wales, present so many features of novelty and difficulty ... [that there is a need for] communicating their mutual experience, and benefitting by their reciprocal advice, ... [and] for the purpose of effecting ... improvements in the breed of animals, and experiments in the growth of produce.”¹⁴ It held its first Show – the ‘Parramatta Fair’ – in October 1824. Despite the early personality clashes, the Agricultural Society survived until 1837, when it collapsed in the economic depression following a run of bad seasons (Stoddart (1986)).

Because of criticisms about Governor Brisbane's administration of the colony, he and Frederick Goulburn were recalled to Britain in 1825. Some of the men whom

¹⁴ Agricultural Society of NSW, Anniversary addresses, 1823-1825. Mitchell Library, 630.6/A

Brisbane had nurtured in the fledgling Philosophical Society by then had become his detractors, just as they were for his predecessor, Lachlan Macquarie. Back in Scotland, Brisbane set up his third observatory at his home in Roxburghshire. An appointment to the largely ceremonial position as Colonel of the 34th Regiment provided him with a comfortable income that allowed him to continue his patronage of astronomy. He published the results of his astronomical work in scientific journals and became President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh for 27 years, from 1833 until his death in 1860, aged 87.

After Brisbane was recalled to England, the government acquired his observatory, instruments and library. Carl Rümker then returned to Parramatta in May 1826, and discovered another comet. The next Governor, Lieutenant-General Ralph Darling appointed him to the position of Government Astronomer, the first person to hold this title. Rümker then published the results of his observations since 1822 without acknowledging the role of his former employer, Brisbane. For many years afterwards the two men pursued a vitriolic correspondence over this breach of scientific convention. However, when Rümker went to London in 1829 to purchase new instruments, Sir Thomas Brisbane was able to use his influence to have him dismissed from government service. Rümker returned to his native Hamburg and became director of the observatory there, while continuing to work on his Australian star catalogue. He received many international awards for his achievements, but is little recognised in this country (Bergman (1967)).

Brisbane's Scottish instrument-maker James Dunlop replaced Rümker as superintendent of the Parramatta observatory in 1831. After

1837 his activity declined, possibly because of poor health. Much of his work in this period was never published, and he resigned in 1847, dying the following year (Wood (1967)). Captain Phillip Parker King was another keen astronomer, who had built a private observatory on his property at Dunheved. He went on to become the first Australian-born Admiral in the Royal Navy (ADB (1967)). King was influential in persuading the government to build an observatory in Sydney after the Parramatta observatory fell into disrepair, and he ensured that the instruments from Brisbane's observatory remained in the colony as a nucleus for the new institution.¹⁵

As we have seen, there were numerous disappointments as well as notable scientific achievements in the four years that Sir Thomas Brisbane spent in New South Wales. The Philosophical Society that he led so briefly is the forerunner of the present Royal Society of New South Wales, formed in 1866, which itself was the progenitor of ANZAAS. It was also the precursor of many other professional bodies, including the Australian Medical Association and the Institution of Engineers Australia. The Agricultural Society that formed under Brisbane's patronage was revived later as the Cumberland Agricultural Society, which eventually became the Royal Agricultural Society, aiming to bring scientific methods to the pastoral industry. The natural history collections of the Colonial Museum that originated under his leadership became the Australian Museum in 1836.

Thomas Brisbane can truly be described as the founding patron of Australian science. He deserves to be remembered on this anniversary.

¹⁵ Pickett & Lomb, *op.cit.*, p.22.

The Governor Brisbane Symposium

This paper was presented at a symposium commemorating Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane organised by the Royal Society of NSW in conjunction with the National Trust (NSW) and the Parramatta Park Trust. Three lectures were presented at the National Trust headquarters, Observatory Hill on Thursday, 1 December 2011. On Saturday, 3 December, there was an inspection of the archaeological site of Sir Thomas Brisbane's observatory at Parramatta, followed by a tour of Old Government House with particular attention to relics of the Brisbane family.

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Peter Tyler

(First draft of manuscript received 8 January 2012; final manuscript accepted 12 October 2012.)

Peter Tyler was the Historian of the Royal Society of New South Wales. He died in May 2012 having completed a first draft of this paper. The final paper was prepared with the assistance of A/Professor Carol Liston. Peter was a noted historical researcher, writing books and papers about medical history, building, anti-tuberculosis campaigns, the NSW public service and the state records of NSW.

