

## Bicentennial celebrations The Bicentennial Garden Party

Her Excellency, the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC

The speech given by Her Excellency, The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC, Governor of New South Wales, on 12 March 2022 at Government House on the occasion of The Royal Society of New South Wales's Bicentenary Garden Party.<sup>1</sup>

*Bujari gamarruwa  
Diyn Babana Gamarada Gadigal Ngura*

In the Sydney language of the people of the Eora Nation, I welcome you to Government House. In paying my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging of the Gadigal and of the Indigenous nations across New South Wales, I recognise their deep knowledge, care and custodianship of land, seas and waterways.

I welcome Dr Susan Pond AM, President of the RSNSW, the Royal Society Fellows and Members — what I would term the Royal Society Family! I especially welcome descendants and family members of former Presidents, including of James Douglas Stewart, the Society's President in 1927, a renowned veterinary scientist, and of David Branigan AM, the Royal Society's President in 1995, and an eminent geologist. In recognising the service of Presidents, past and present, I acknowledge that of John Hardie AM, the longest serving President, whose membership of the Royal Society spans a quarter of the history of the Royal Society in NSW.

The Royal Society of New South Wales and its progenitor societies have deeply impacted the intellectual life of our nation. Much of that has been recorded in its unique

library collection, charting the evolution of intellectual thought in New South Wales for 200 years.

Had there been an opening celebratory garden party all those 200 years ago, it would have been across the road in Bridge Street on the site of Old Government House, construction of this House not commencing until the late 1830s, with the Governor taking up residence in 1846. The Moreton Bay Fig tree which stands so grandly beside the House was planted as a sapling at that time.

As at the Society's founding date, there were few local Indigenous people, the population having been decimated by a smallpox outbreak which left the community bereft of its elders and thus its leadership. Its impact remains today. The European population numbered some 30,000. Although the number of free settlers had begun to increase rapidly after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, convicts still comprised 40% of the white population. Squatters had begun to occupy the vast plains of rural New South Wales following the first inland settlement in Bathurst.

The New South Wales Legislative Council, an appointed legislative body providing advice to the Governor and Australia's

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from the RSNSW *Bulletin* 461, April 2022. Edited by Jason Antony and Bruce Ramage.  
<https://royalsoc.org.au/submit-bulletin-documents/2022-issues/386-461-april/file>

oldest legislative body, was not established until 1823.<sup>2</sup>

It was into this disparate admixture of peoples that the Philosophical Society of Australasia stepped in 1821, with ten members, and Governor Brisbane as first President, established “with a view to enquiring into the various branches of physical science of this vast continent and its adjacent regions.”<sup>3</sup> Society members met at each other’s homes, sharing the books and papers they had brought with them, or were able to have shipped from London, encouraging one another in their scientific interests.

Professor A.J. Elkin in his 1966 Centenary<sup>4</sup> Oration described the aspirations of those first members thus: “These little gatherings held out hopes of being oases of refreshment in what must have seemed a cultural desert.”<sup>5</sup> That refreshing start — as visionary as it was — would be short-lived.

By the end of 1822, Judge Barron Field had written that the “little Society” has “expired in the baneful atmosphere of distracted politics.”<sup>6</sup> He revised that description a few years later, stating that the Society was “in a state of suspended animation.”<sup>7</sup> Three decades later the establishment of Sydney University, which had been the great dream of the Society, gave it a significant new lease of life.<sup>8</sup>

The path since has not always been smooth, with vicissitudes of impecuniousness, politics, fallings-out and fallings back-in, and with the significant honour of Royal favour being conferred in 1866. But through it all, the Royal Society has continued to be that nexus of ideas and discovery, challenging us to think differently, analyse the latest research, to discuss, debate and understand some of the major issues confronting humanity.

So it is, that in marking 200 years, we have much to celebrate:

- 3260 papers delivered to the Society in all its forms, since 1822, most published in scholarly journals;
- The oldest and most prestigious awards in Australia;
- 480 Fellows, including 17 Distinguished Fellows — at 2021 count! — and 212 esteemed Members;
- Seven annual Royal Society and Four Learned Academies Forums, hosted here at Government House;
- The success of *Ideas@theHouse*;
- The foundation in 2021 of a new Royal Society Western branch; and
- This year’s fascinating *NEXUS* exhibition, held at the State Library.<sup>9</sup>

2 <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lc/roleandhistory/Pages/The-history-of-the-Council.aspx>

3 <https://www.royalsoc.org.au/about-us/history>

4 Centenary of designation as a Royal Society

5 AP Elkin: Centenary Oration (1966): page 13. <https://royalsoc.org.au/images/pdf/CentenaryVolume/CV-oo-Elkin.pdf>

6 *ibid*, page 14

7 *ibid*, page 15

8 University of Sydney, founded 1850

9 <https://www.royalsoc.org.au/events-news/events-2022>

A bicentenary of an institution whose purpose has been to “enrich lives through knowledge”<sup>10</sup> is an occasion that richly deserves to be celebrated. Indeed, it is of State — and of national — importance that this occasion be recognised. As much as in

the past, research, inquiry, discussion and debate are critical to our future.

Congratulations, Royal Society! Please join me in a Toast ...

*To the Royal Society of New South Wales and the next 200 years: Omnia Quærite!*<sup>11</sup>



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<sup>10</sup> 200-year motto

<sup>11</sup> “Question everything.” Royal Society motto