

## Book Launch

### *Knowledge for a Nation. Origins of the Royal Society of New South Wales* by Dr Anne Coote

The book launch included words from the Society’s patron, Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC; Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon, NSW State Librarian; the President, Dr Susan Pond; and the author, Dr Anne Coote. There is a review by the Vice President, Dr Peter Shergold.<sup>1</sup>

#### Our Society’s Patron, Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley

I am delighted to be part of this evening’s event and to say a few words about the launch of *Knowledge for a Nation*. The role of Governors within the Society’s story features throughout the book, and as Patron I’m proud that our close association continues today.

The halls of Government House contain portraits of many of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century characters featured in the book. In the main hall there is the striking painting of Thomas Brisbane, the 6<sup>th</sup> Governor of New South Wales, President of the short-lived Philosophical Society of Australasia, established in 1821. His love of astronomy is expressed in this first full-body portrait commissioned in the Colony by the inclusion of his books, maps, and the spherical astrolabe in the left-hand corner.

Then, Sir William Denison, the 11<sup>th</sup> Governor, whom Dr Coote described as a skilled engineer and knowledgeable conchologist, with an interest in other aspects of Natural History. His invigoration of the Philosophical Society of NSW in 1855 was a crucial next step towards the development of the Society as we know it, even though the popular



Sir William Denison. Photograph courtesy of Government House, Sydney.

press at the time questioned whether his “scientific Excellency” would also be a practical philosopher, capable of writing his name

<sup>1</sup> These addresses were given at the launch of Anne Coote’s history of the Royal Society, *Knowledge for a Nation*, on 2 October 2024; see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To\\_QQ2Fb-mc&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To_QQ2Fb-mc&t=6s)

on the railways, the electric telegraph and the fortifications of New South Wales.<sup>2</sup>

The last portrait I want to mention is a young Queen Victoria, displayed in our ballroom. In the second half of 1866 Her Majesty gave assent to the adoption of the title “Royal,” allowing the inaugural general meeting of the Royal Society of New South Wales to proceed in the following year.

As a repository of this art, Government House is an expression of both the past and present relationship between Governors and the Society, featuring these 19<sup>th</sup> century characters, while continuing to host significant 21<sup>st</sup>-century Royal Society events, including the Royal Society and Learned Academies Forum. In November there will be lively discussions on the 2024 theme, “Threats to Democracy.”

We also welcome hundreds of visitors each year who come to participate in our collaborative effort *Ideas@theHouse*, a vibrant platform exploring important and influential ideas. Since its first iteration — which was online, as COVID was upon us — we’ve discussed Colonial mapping, music, science, Shakespeare, philosophy, politics and — courtesy of Richard Tognetti — even considered the theme of nothing. At the end of this month we will turn to a discussion of the law of the sea.<sup>3</sup>

I congratulate the Society and Dr Anne Coote for this wonderful history, and — without wanting to put out any spoilers — find it is entirely appropriate that the book challenges some of the long-held beliefs regarding the Society’s antecedents. In doing so it’s an exemplar of the motto of

the Society: *question everything*. May the Society continue to go from strength to strength as you enrich lives through knowledge and promote the research, inquiry, discussion, and debate so critical to our future.

### Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon

We are thrilled to have you all here at the State Library to celebrate this milestone moment and the launch of *Knowledge for a Nation*. I begin by acknowledging country. The State Library of NSW acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which the Library stands. I pay respect to Aboriginal elders, past, present and future, and extend that respect to other First Nations people.

The Library has had a close relationship with RSNSW since the 1970s, so it is so fitting that the book is launched here tonight. It was first suggested — more than 60 years ago — that RSNSW archives be deposited at the Library, but these transfers did not commence until 1995, when the Royal Society itself was facing challenges. It is now the case that nearly all the Society’s archives are in the custody of the State Library.

Indeed in many ways the Royal Society and the Library can point to similar origin stories. Both organisations can trace their origins back to the 1820s, and both organisations, like so many of the era, relied on the same pool of educated, upper-middle-class gentlemen to administer them. Crucially, they were both inspired by a belief that the pursuit of science, literature and culture was important for colonial development.

<sup>2</sup> See “Denison and Science.” *Bell’s Life in Sydney*, Feb. 3, 1855, p.2. [Ed.] <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/59759779>

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Stephens, The big thaw: who governs Antarctica’s ice? 31 October 2024; see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiHTYy5\\_dfw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiHTYy5_dfw)

The Australian Subscription Library, which was established in 1826 and whose collections were purchased by the NSW Colonial government in 1869 to establish the Free Public Library, touted access to the latest scientific and political journals from Europe as one of the advantages of belonging to it. Not surprising, then, that many of the earliest iterations of scientific societies which preceded the formal establishment of the Royal Society chose to hold their meetings in the rooms of the Australian Subscription Library.

Dr Anne Coote's excellent *Knowledge for a Nation: Origins of the Royal Society of New South Wales* is a crystal-clear and beautifully constructed exposition on the intellectual milieu, international parallels and the political machinations behind the creation and administration of the Royal Society. It helps inform not only the history of science in NSW, but more broadly the larger intellectual climate of Australia.

The book is built on the foundation work of the late Dr Peter Tyler, who was the inaugural (2008) Merewether Fellow at the Library. His fellowship focused on the history of learned societies in NSW with an emphasis on the Royal Society. Our Fellowship programme (which turned 50 this year) is so important in so many ways. Often it is years later when we see the public presentation of the research in books, films and in so many other formats. Dr Coote notes in her acknowledgements a debt of gratitude to Dr Peter Tyler.

*Knowledge for a Nation* is a book which is genuinely engaging: this is not something we can take for granted in the field of institutional or corporate histories! As noted in the foreword, the storytelling is compelling not only because of her exper-

tise as an historian and author but also her expansive and deep research during the past ten years. It takes the story outside the constrictions of Royal Society personalities, into the much more significant world of colonial society and politics. There are surely parallels between the impulses which inspired colonial scientists and natural history collectors and enthusiasts with book collectors like David Scott Mitchell who, in the 1870s and 1880s — the heyday of the Royal Society — was actively compiling his library of Australiana books, manuscripts and pictures, which he ultimately gave to the State, and which formed the nucleus of the Mitchell Library.

I was particularly interested in Chapter 8, "Women and the Royal Society," that explores the role of women, and their access to learning and learned societies, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The determinedly male leadership of the Royal Society in many ways was also reflected in the exclusively male composition of the Library's administrative boards. The often expressed fear that a woman's constitution could not bear the rigours of science and its pursuit is perhaps paralleled by the Library's anxiety about popular fiction which was thought to be enervating and immoral. When the Australian Subscription Library collections were acquired by the NSW Government in 1869, the popular fiction collection was sent to the Gladesville Lunatic Asylum. Only classic, morally acceptable, fiction — Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, William Thackeray, Jane Austen etc. — was retained. Dr Coote's evocation of this period is an important addition to our understanding. As Dr Coote remarks: "However scientific its goals, the Royal Society of New South Wales remained

a gentlemen’s club. Women would not be allowed to join it until 1935.”

Women were, however, encouraged to attend the splendid conversazione events which from 1879 were usually held in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney. It was a coming together of self-improvement, entertainment and social connection — clearly fashionable and popular events bringing to the fore science and technology for a wide audience. They also underscore the value of the Society as a leading learned body that was thoroughly up to date. I learnt from the book that each Ordinary member of the Society was allowed to bring two female relatives. In November 1879, the *Australian Town and Country Journal* depicted on its cover the lively crowd attending the first RSNSW conversazione in the Great Hall, with a large number of women present.<sup>4</sup> Wonderful to see the cover of the book is a detail from an illustration of the RSNSW conversazione held in the Great Hall, Sydney University, published by the *Illustrated Sydney News*, 25 October 1884.

Many of its collections, now held in the Mitchell Library, have been instrumental for the writing of the book. Apart from the Society’s own archive, the Rev. W.B. Clarke papers, the Edgeworth David papers, Lawrence Hargrave papers, to name a few, have helped inform *Knowledge for a Nation*. The Library has also been delighted to be able to support the book through the provision of the majority of its illustrations.

While this book necessarily focuses on origins, the Library happily maintains a

very contemporary relationship with the Royal Society. I thank our brilliant Mitchell Librarian, Richard Neville, who has shared the history and background of the association between the Library and the Royal Society with me.

Since 2017 our relationship has grown much closer, under the advocacy of Dr John Vallance, my predecessor, with the signing of a 2023 MoU formalising this collaboration. The Royal Society now meets at the Library; its own collections, once properly assessed, arranged and described, will also be lodged here. The association between the Society and the Library has been long running and the original Minute Book of the Philosophical Society of Australasia (June 1821 to August 1822) is held in the collection. And of course the book begins with an account of Australia’s first learned society, the Philosophical Society of Australasia (1821–1822), which is the Royal Society’s enduring inspiration, if not its earliest incarnation, as noted in the publicity for the book.

As both the Society and the Library look to the future, we also find strength and understanding in interrogating our surprisingly parallel pasts. Of course, *Knowledge for a Nation: Origins of the Royal Society of New South Wales* tells the early history of a learned society still active in the intellectual culture of 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia. Dr Coote’s *Knowledge for a Nation* beautifully captures this story.

Congratulations, Dr Coote; congratulations, the Royal Society. I officially launch this book, *Knowledge for a Nation*.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/70974410>

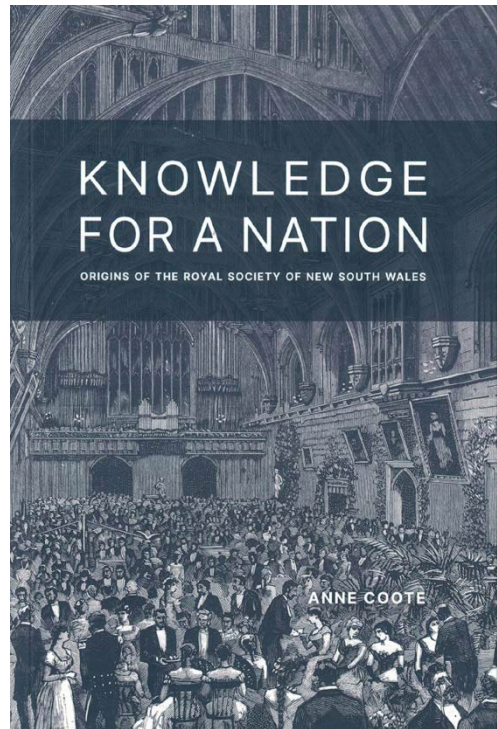


Dr Anne Coote

Good evening, everyone. Thank you for coming tonight. Thank you, Dr Butler-Bowdon, for your thoughtful and generous words in launching my book. My gratitude is also due to the Royal Society President, Dr Susan Pond for initiating its publication, to the publishing committee for their contribution, and especially to Dr Davina Jackson who has devoted so much of her own time, energy and expertise to editing the manuscript and carrying it through to publication. I also want to acknowledge the late Dr Peter Tyler, whose untimely death prevented him completing his Royal Society history.

We're told that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but I think this one gives a pretty good indication of what's to be found inside. As its subtitle indicates, my book is about beginnings. It takes the Society's story from its foundation up to the outbreak of World War I. The Society was at the peak of its public prominence in this period. Its monthly meetings were reported in detail by Sydney's leading daily papers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Empire*. Those articles were often copied, at least in part, by other journals, including country newspapers, which multiplied during the second half of the nineteenth century. Of course, not everybody read those reports, but most readers would have at least been aware of the Society's existence. More important, it was also during this time that the Royal Society of New South Wales contributed substantially to the development of an active scientific community in New South Wales.

The main title, *Knowledge for a Nation* sums up what the book has to say about the Royal Society's purpose at this time — to



foster knowledge creation for the national good. Officially that knowledge included “science, art, literature and philosophy.” A Royal Society section, devoted to the arts, did exist briefly during the late 1870s, but in practice members focused almost entirely on science, mathematics, and subjects now considered part of the social sciences such as ethnology and economics. Developing the resources of Australia was the Royal Society's stated objective, but in practice, the focus was largely on the colonial nation, New South Wales.

The cover image is an artist's impression of the gala conversazione held by the Royal Society in 1888 to mark the first meeting in Sydney of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Its venue was the Great Hall of Sydney Uni-

versity. The Society's close connection with this institution is another theme of the book.

A whole chapter is devoted to the character and significance of the Society's conversaciones. It is one of five thematic chapters which are sandwiched by a chronological account of the Society's history, told against the background of colonial history and developments in the discipline of science. Chapters 1 to 4 narrate the Royal Society's development up to and including the 1880s. Chapter 10 follows the Society through its vicissitudes from the 1890s. This is not a triumphal account of ongoing and inevitable progress. Hiatus, unsatisfactory accommodation, falling membership and financial crisis are all part of the story. Fortunately, the vision and commitment of a few members allowed the Society to continue with its work. In the new century it also experimented with measures to attract members, undertook renovations and was active in the formation and organisation of the AAAS.

The book concludes with the 1914 visit to Australia of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS). Taken as metropolitan recognition for the existence of a viable Australian scientific community, this event was certainly gratifying for the Royal Society. But — spoiler alert — it was also something of a reality check.

Like most previous and current accounts of the Royal Society's history, my book begins in 1821 with an account of the first learned society formed on Australian soil — the short-lived Philosophical Society of Australasia (1821–22). This has long been claimed as the Royal Society's earliest incarnation. In the spirit of the Society's own motto — *Omnia Quærite* or *Question Everything* — I examined the veracity of the

Royal Society's foundation story, and found it wanting. Peter Tyler reached the same conclusion, and, as long ago as 1918, so did the Society's past President and long-serving Honorary Secretary, Joseph Maiden. It was “not historically correct,” said Maiden, for the Royal Society to claim “lineal ... or even collateral descent” from the Philosophical Society of Australasia. That body, he said, was better understood as the Royal Society's “forerunner” and its “exemplar.”

The 1821 society could also be regarded as the forerunner of the several learned societies founded in New South Wales from 1822 to 1850. But the earliest body for which there is any evidence of a direct connection with the Royal Society, is the Australian Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Science, Commerce and Agriculture. It was formed in 1850. Its energetic Secretary was Henry Grattan Douglass. As a young man, he had also been Secretary of the Philosophical Society of Australasia. But this is hardly proof that the Australian Society of 1850 was the 1821 society, woken like Rip van Winkle from a sleep of nearly 30 years. Indeed, as a body dedicated to the application of science to the colony's economic development, the Australian Society had more in common with the several agricultural, viticultural and horticultural societies formed since 1822.

The final meeting of the Australian Society occurred in May 1851, just as news of the gold discoveries near Bathurst were creating chaos in Sydney. But several years later, members of the Australian Society helped found the Philosophical Society of New South Wales, bringing with them what was left of the Australian Society's funds. In 1850, Governor William Denison had summoned the remaining Australian Society

members to a meeting at the Royal Hotel where they agreed to reorganising under his presidency. Denison was an engineer and a knowledgeable conchologist with an interest in other aspects of natural history. Science for Denison was much more than a private intellectual indulgence. It was an instrument of public policy — a resource that governments should foster.

I probably don't have to tell you about the disadvantage to a learned society of having no dedicated building. That was the lot of the Philosophical Society of NSW. Initially, it met in the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts in Pitt Street, but meetings soon moved to the Australian Library and Literary Institution, located on the corner of Bent and Macquarie streets, just across from where we meet tonight.

Lack of a building was the least of Philosophical Society's problems. The first couple of years had been promising. Some 90 men had applied to join at the first meeting. By May 1858 there were 174 members and the previous year's income was nearly £205, so, flush with funds, the Society purchased some debentures. But income was only £114 over the same period to May 1863 and in 1866, the Society's bank account was overdrawn by more than £33.

There were signs of demoralisation in the Council of Management. At 16 of the 61 Council meetings from January 1861 to November 1866, only three Councillors were present. For 20 programmed meetings, no quorum could be mustered at all. Attendance at general meetings was also poor. On one occasion only the Governor (Sir John Young), Vice-President John Smith, and the scheduled speaker bothered to come.

The Council's response was to form a committee. Its two members — George

Smalley, the Government Astronomer, and Edward Bedford, the Government Medical Advisor — suggested a number of ways to enhance the Society's appeal. Only one of these really had legs: changing the Society's name. Queen Victoria's permission to adopt the title "Royal" was received in December 1866.

At the Royal Society's inaugural general meeting in 1867, senior Vice-President, the Reverend William Branwhite Clarke, told members that the utilitarian "*especial* object" of their research should be "the development of the Physical character of the country we live in, and the development of its Natural History and Productions." Public perception of the Royal Society's relevance to colonial development was enhanced in 1870 by a series of eight well-publicised and quite fiery meetings devoted to the subject of Sydney's future water supply. Twenty-one new members were recruited as a result. But too many men were failing to pay their subscriptions. Revenue raised during 1870 was just over £112, less than could be expected from 129 enrolled members paying one guinea each, including the 21 new ones, who also paid an entrance fee. Many on the roll had apparently lost interest and considered themselves to have resigned. By the beginning of 1871, the Society could barely make ends meet and the following year, it had to sell the last of its debentures.

But salvation was on the horizon in the form of a new member, Archibald Liviersidge, soon to be Professor of Geology and Mineralogy at Sydney University. He joined the Royal Society in November 1872, became a Council member in 1873, and in 1875 was elected Honorary Secretary, along with Carl Adolph Leibius, a long-term Society member. Under their leadership, and

with the support of influential men such as Clarke and the Government Astronomer, Henry Chamberlain Russell, the Royal Society was re-organised and re-invigorated.

Even before his election as Secretary, Liversidge had managed to find the Society better accommodation. Since 1869 meetings had been held in the Exchange Building, located at the junction of Pitt, Bridge, and Gresham streets. In 1875, Liversidge secured access to two rooms, sub-leased from the Society of Arts, in a building known as Clark's Assembly Rooms located at what is now 5 Elizabeth Street. This building was sketched by Joseph Fowles for his book, *Sydney in 1848*.<sup>5</sup> A former dancing school, it had a good-sized ballroom (55 feet × 25 feet), useful for meetings, on its ground floor. It stood on the western side of Elizabeth Street, just a few doors up from Hunter Street, in the direction of King Street.

The next goal was to obtain freehold. Applications to the colonial government for financial assistance eventually bore fruit. Late in 1877 the government promised an annual subsidy for running expenses and a large one-off grant to purchase a building, both proportional to money raised by the Society. With members' contributions and a substantial donation from local philanthropist Thomas Walker, the Royal Society purchased its Elizabeth Street headquarters in 1878.

A second storey was added in the 1890s and a third in 1906. In 1911 serious structural problems caused the Society to contemplate relocation. Architects Mansfield and Son were engaged to draw plans for a purpose-built building on a potential site in Phillip Street. A purchaser offered £11,000 for the

current building but no record survives to explain why the sale and rebuild did not proceed.

Guided by Liversidge, the Royal Society was effectively reborn. Rules governing the vetting of new members, discouragement of fee defaulters, attendance at Council meetings and the regularity and conduct of general meetings, were tightened or extended. Liversidge took over as editor of the Society's *Journal* and a system of publication exchange was introduced with institutions and learned societies in the colonies and abroad. This allowed the Society to accumulate an up-to-date scientific library, of great use to colonial scientists like physicist Professor Richard Threlfall, who found it superior for his purposes to Sydney University's library. As a measure of the Society's reinvigoration, membership increased from 176 in 1876 to 494 in 1884.

The Clarke Medal, awarded for "meritorious contributions to the Geology, Mineralogy and Natural History of Australasia," was one of a range of measures, implemented from the 1870s to encourage original research. They included the appointment of honorary members, the introduction of specialist sections and essay prizes for original research. These are discussed in detail in two chapters of the book.

Arguably the most effective means of encouraging local scientists were the Society's now regular monthly meetings. Members could present their research, benefit from the ensuing discussion and later have their polished work published in a *Journal* that was exchanged with institutions across the world. Many papers dealt with issues relevant to colonial development

<sup>5</sup> See Fowles J *Sydney in 1848*. Sydney: D Wall (1848). <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebookso6/o600151h.html> [Ed.]



including water supply, this time in the interior. Members with expertise in geology, meteorology, engineering and chemistry focused their attention on the subject of artesian water.

Members' papers also reflected developments in the discipline of science. Lawrence Hargrave kept members informed about his experiments in aeronautics. Other papers reflected their authors' interest and expertise in new specialties, such as phytochemistry, food chemistry and parasitology. Hargrave was an expert amateur, wealthy enough to fund his own work. Over time more presenters were formally qualified professionals: university personnel and men employed by institutions like the Sydney Technological Museum, the Bureau of Microbiology, and the government departments of agriculture and mining.

I'll conclude by saying something about the membership. After all, it was members' shared assumptions, values and goals that underpinned corporate action. Professional scientists (including medical practitioners) joined the Royal Society and its earlier incarnations. There were also clergymen, lawyers, parliamentarians, businessmen, journalists, artists and clerks — only some of whom any had any scientific expertise. This was not a prerequisite for membership. Paramount was a man's reputation for gentlemanly behaviour. He had to fit in, so there were strict rules for vetting applicants. They had to be nominated and seconded by existing members and have their applications read at two (and later three) monthly meetings. One negative vote in five was sufficient to exclude them.

James Samuel Palmer, a taxidermist, dealer in natural history specimens, and self-described "ornithologist," was invited to exhibit his birds at a Royal Society *conversazione* in 1869. He would never have been accepted as a member. This was not only because he was a former convict, whose stepdaughter had been involuntarily connected with a notorious murder. Palmer's own reputation for honesty was also somewhat questionable. The convict stain was less important a generation on. Mayor of Sydney, James Merriman, who was the son of a convict, was welcome to join, as was the Australian Museum's Curator, Edward Pierson Ramsay. He was a grandson of the convict emancipist, Simeon Lord.

One of many Society members of interest was Joseph Dyer, who joined the Philosophical Society of NSW in 1857. Between June 1857 and June 1859, he edited the *Sydney Magazine of Science and Art*, published by James Waugh, which printed papers read before the Society. Since arriving in the colony, he had been a journalist, Secretary of the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts and one of its lecturers, and Secretary of the Sydney Insurance Company. Always full of ideas for projects and inventions, "secretary-savant Dyer," according to *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist, "Peter Possum," was a familiar figure on Pitt Street, "dashing hither and thither in a superbly swinging hansom." He died in New Zealand, where his granddaughter, Katherine Mansfield would become one of that country's distinguished authors.

Eliezer Montefiore<sup>6</sup> was the manager of the Pacific Fire and Marine Insurance Company. He chaired the Royal Society section

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<sup>6</sup> He lived at Hampton Villa, Grafton Street, Balmain, the later residence of Sir Henry Parkes. [Ed.]

devoted to the arts. He was a member of the Academy of Art, a trustee of the Sydney Art Gallery and an artist in his own right. Born in Barbados, he was one of several members with connections to slavery. His mother's cousin had jointly loaned the British Government £15 million, to fund the compensation paid to British slaveholders, following slavery's abolition from 1834.

Henry Chamberlain Russell established three regional stations for observation of the transit of Venus in 1874. Two notable Royal Society expert amateur astronomers were stationed at Woodford in the Blue Mountains. They were surveyor Frederick Eccleston du Faur and wine merchant George Denton Hirst. Hirst led the Sydney branch of the British Astronomical Association and was later an honorary member of the Royal Astronomical Society.<sup>7</sup> John Tebbutt, another expert amateur astronomer among the members, earned international recognition for discoveries made at his own observatory at Windsor. His strained relationship with the Government Astronomer, mostly played out publicly in print, was a side-effect of the increasing professionalisation of science. Animosity surfaced briefly at one Royal Society meeting where Russell, having read out Tebbutt's paper (in the author's absence), made a less than scholarly remark about Tebbutt's conclusions and a pointed comment about the superiority of the Observatory's equipment. But any differ-

ences among members were far outweighed by what bound them together: family ties, professional connection, class. Something else they had in common was gender.

Women and the Royal Society are the subject of a separate chapter. There was nothing in the Society's original rules that excluded women; it was simply assumed that membership would be exclusively male. This had been consistent with contemporary cultural norms. Nevertheless, there were a few talented women who managed to exert some influence on the Royal Society's proceedings. Harriet Morgan and Helena Forde, daughters of Alexander Walker Scott, were knowledgeable entomologists and talented botanical artists. Helena provided illustrations for a paper on oology read before the Royal Society in 1865 by her cousin Edward Pierson Ramsay.<sup>8</sup> Both sisters later illustrated his book on that subject.

Between 1893 and 1914 the names of five other women, appeared as joint or sole authors of papers published in the Royal Society's *Journal*. In each case their papers were read out for them, and in their absence, by a Society member. Florence Martin was the daughter of a former premier of NSW. She assisted physicist Richard Threlfall with his research at the university and was his co-author on two papers published in the *Journal* in 1893 and 1897 respectively.<sup>9</sup> Fanny Cohen graduated from Sydney University with First Class Honours and the

7 See the paper on Hirst by Lomb, Orchiston, and Jacob in this issue. [Ed.]

8 Ramsay, Edward Pierson. On the oology of Australia, read to the Philosophical Society of N.S.W., 5 July 1865, in *Trans. of the Philosophical Society of N.S.W. 1862-1865* 309-329. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/part/345638>

9 Threlfall, Richard and Florence Martin. On an approximate method of finding the forces acting in magnetic circuits *J. & Proc. of the Royal Society of N.S.W.*, 27: 197-218, 1893, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41687612#page/211/mode/iup>; and Threlfall, Richard and Florence Martin. A contribution to the study of oxygen at low pressures *J. & Proc. of the Royal Society of N.S.W.*, 31: 79-82, 1897, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41844829#page/97/mode/iup>

University Medal. In 1910, when employed as a university geology demonstrator, she was sole author of a Royal Society paper on azurite crystals.<sup>10</sup> In 1912, another university medallist and geology department demonstrator, Catherine Drummond Smith, published a paper jointly with her future brother-in-law, geologist Leo Cotton.<sup>11</sup> Jean White, a Melbourne university graduate and the second Australian woman to receive a Doctorate in Science, was co-author of a paper on Australian flora with botany Professor Alfred Ewart.<sup>12</sup> Mary Martha Everitt, Mistress in Charge of Girls at Parramatta Public School, collaborated with Royal Society member Robert Hamilton Mathews on a paper about the language and culture of Aboriginal people in south-east New South Wales.<sup>13</sup> A controversy regarding Mathews' contribution to this paper is discussed in the book.<sup>14</sup>

The Royal Society's Council's ongoing position on female membership was stated in 1880: "The rules only provide for the admission of ... gentlemen as members; it is not customary for ladies to attend the ordinary meetings." Women were very welcome

to attend the Royal Society's conversazioni, but other learned societies went further: Harriet Morgan and Helena Forde were made honorary members of the Entomological Society of NSW. The Royal Societies of Victoria and Queensland admitted their first female members in 1883 and 1889, and the Linnaean Society of NSW admitted botanist Sally Hynes in 1891. There was no equivalent development at the Royal Society of New South Wales. Even as membership continued to fall from the 1890s, there is no record of any formal discussion about admitting women. The Royal Society of NSW remained a gentlemen's club until 1935.

Much had been achieved in the Society's first 64 years. Apart from their gender blind spot, members had demonstrated a healthy capacity to embrace change. Radical reorganisation from the 1870s had been readily accepted, and, later, members were innovative in their efforts to retain and attract members. As I say in the book, this proven ability to respond to challenges was likely to serve the Society well in the years ahead.

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10 Cohen, Fanny. Notes on the azurite crystals from Broken Hill, *J. & Proc. of the Royal Society of N.S.W.* 44: 577–583, 1910. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41916492#page/709/mode/iup>

11 Smith, Catherine Drummond and Leo Arthur Cotton. Some crystal measurements of chillagite, *J. & Proc. of the Royal Society of N.S.W.* 46: 207–219, 1912. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41676580#page/243/mode/iup>

12 Ewart, Alfred James and Jean White, assisted by J. R. Tovey. Contributions to the flora of Australia, *J. & Proc. of the Royal Society of N.S.W.* 42: 184–200, 1908. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41579693#page/218/mode/iup>

13 Mathews, Robert Hamilton and Miss Mary Martha Everitt. The organisation, language and initiation ceremonies of the Aborigines of the south-east coast of N. S. W. *J. & Proc. of the Royal Society of N.S.W.*, 34: 262–281, 1900. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41821708#page/294/mode/iup>

14 See also: Christopher R. Illert. The centenary of Mary Everitt's "Gundungurra" grammar. *J. & P. of the Royal Society of N. S. W.*, 134: 19–44, 2001. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/46349409#page/21/mode/iup>

### Foreword by Susan Pond

The Royal Society of New South Wales is a vibrant organisation active in the intellectual life of twenty-first century Australia.<sup>15</sup> In this book, Dr Anne Coote provides the very first comprehensive account of the early history of the RSNSW and its antecedents — from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of World War I. It is mandatory reading for any current or future member of the Society. Even though this time span and the Society itself embody a sliver of the record of human intellectual achievement, it is important to understand how and why it was conceived and developed, what it achieved for Australia, and how it is viewed now through the eyes of a cultural historian living in the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Dr Coote has created a very readable account that is hard to put down. By using the characters involved in the Society to tell its story, she has produced a rollicking recital of their lives and times, of the Society's fortunes and misfortunes, ebbs and flows, highs and lows. The storytelling is compelling not only because of her expertise as an historian and author but also her expansive and deep research during the past ten years. To paraphrase Anne's own words, her research rapidly became all-consuming, involving close study of the Society's extensive archives, and other primary and secondary sources, and taking more than six years of her working life. She dedicates the book to her late husband Robert Coote, a science graduate with a keen interest in mathematics and its history who, she says, "unselfishly accepted my day-long absences

either in Sydney at the Mitchell Library or spent closeted in my study writing and rewriting."

As President of today's Society, I was gripped by a time-travelling sensation as I read the book. So many echoes of the Society's past still reverberate in the Society's Act and Rules and through the recurring issues on our Council agenda. These include: clarifying and communicating the purpose and value of the Society in our ever-changing world; delivering unique value to members and the broader public; understanding the motivations of members to join and contribute; overcoming the challenges of small financial reserves; having no fixed premises; preserving and making our extensive library and archives accessible; and maintaining the energy and enthusiasm of our volunteer workforce. We still hold general meetings on the first Wednesday of each month in Sydney; we continue to publish and exchange the Society's *Journal & Proceedings* with libraries across the world. We are the first colonial society to honour scientific achievement with a bronze medalion and we still award the Clarke Medal and strike it using the original 1876 design that bears a portrait of Clarke with his flowing beard. We also still use the Seal of the Society that was first designed by our late-nineteenth century reformist Archibald Liversidge, albeit modified to remove the words "Founded in 1821. Incorp. 1881."

The Society's claim of a foundation date of 1821 is a tension that Dr Coote confronts in Chapter 1. Centennial celebrations were held by the Society in 1921–22, followed by

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15 Reprinted from A Coote, *Knowledge for a Nation*, pp. ix–xiii.

a spirited series of Bicentennial celebrations in 2021–22. The short-lived Philosophical Society of Australasia, founded in 1821, has long been the Royal Society's initial inspiration, but, as Anne argues, nothing of substance supports the Society's claim for lineal descent from that body. Rather, she identifies as the Royal Society's earliest antecedent, the equally short-lived Australian Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Science, Commerce and Agriculture, formed in 1850. This body's remaining funds and a fair proportion of its membership were absorbed into a new society formed in 1856: The Philosophical Society of New South Wales. This organisation changed its name to the Royal Society of New South Wales when it gained Royal Assent in 1866.

Dr Coote recounts how and why the Society reformed and prospered during the later decades of the nineteenth century under the leadership of its Honorary Secretaries, Archibald Liversidge and Carl Adolph Leibius, and with the support of other leading members such as William Branwhite Clarke (until his death in 1878) and Government Astronomer, Henry Chamberlain Russell. It continued its dominant focus on science applicable to local colonial issues; led increasingly by scientifically trained professionals instead of expert amateurs. Papers at meetings or published in the *Journal* covered topical branches of science, such as development of a flying machine, weather and water supply, geology, mineralogy and astronomy, along with the language and customs of Aboriginal people, who were erroneously thought to be doomed to extinction.

The Society's website today has links to all issues of the *Journal* and will soon publish its digital Bicentennial Bibliography that traces

the timeline of the Society's publications to 2021 and author-alphabetically lists most of our historical papers, including links to online facsimiles. As a companion research guide, the Society has also compiled brief profiles of the professional careers and major achievements of most of the 118 men, and all three women, who have held the gavel at meetings of the Society and its antecedents since 1821.

Dr Coote highlights a small number of talented women whose research papers were presented before the Society and thereby contributed to the published history of science, despite being excluded from Society membership because of their gender. Florence Martin, for example, contributed papers on magnetic circuits and the study of oxygen, and Mary Everitt successfully submitted her research on the language and customs of Aboriginal people in south-east New South Wales. Helena and Harriet Scott, artists and expert entomologists, provided illustrations for the published work of Society members Edward Pierson Ramsay and Gerard Krefft. Nothing in the rules explicitly excluded women from membership. It was simply assumed that women had no place in such an organisation. Papers by these women were presented for them, in their absence, by a Society member. As Dr Coote remarks: "However scientific its goals, the Royal Society of New South Wales remained a gentlemen's club. Women would not be allowed to join it until 1935."

However, women were encouraged to attend the splendid *conversazione* events which from 1879 were usually held in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney. Each Ordinary member of the Society was allowed to bring two female relatives. In November 1879, the *Australian Town and*



*Country Journal* depicted on its cover the lively crowd attending the first RSNSW conversazione in the Great Hall, with a large number of women present. Conversazioni, special meetings “at which self-improvement merged with entertainment and pleasant social interaction,” were fashionable, well-attended events that displayed innovations in science and technology to a wide audience, and enhanced the Society’s “public image as a leading learned body that was up to date.”

More than 50 interesting images illuminate the text of this book. We thank the State Library of New South Wales and its recently retired Director, Dr John Vallance AM, for its welcome support in

scanning and donating many of them. The University of Sydney Archives was similarly generous with images from its collection. I acknowledge and thank John Hardie AM who as a former President and long-serving Council member commissioned Dr Coote to write this book. But it would not exist in published form without the expertise and dedication of a current councillor, Dr Davina Jackson, who has guided this book through the editorial and publication processes. Finally, the Society acknowledges financial support for this project from Create NSW’s Cultural Grants Program, a devolved funding program administered by the Royal Australian Historical Society on behalf of the New South Wales government.

### *Knowledge for a Nation: Book Review by Peter Shergold*

Once, long ago, in a faraway place, I was a historian. I got paid for imagining myself to be somewhere else. I had a sense of what it was like to grimace before the searing heat of a Bessemer converter, in the Carnegie mills in Pittsburgh in the 1890s, pouring molten steel into girders. In my mind’s eye, I could see myself in the demeanour of a young man facing transportation to NSW, as he stood meekly before a judge at the Salisbury assizes in the 1820s, hearing himself found guilty of riot and affray, as his distraught wife, babe in arms, wept loudly in the public gallery.

I knew at first hand the pleasure of being in another world and trying to understand it. I shared the view that the novelist, LP Hartley, set down so memorably in his 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” I loved visiting.

Pick up this wonderful and engaging history by Dr Anne Coote, and you, too, will find yourself in a different place. You will be transported to another time, listening in on vigorous debates about science, technology, medicine, philosophy and society. More importantly, you will gain a sense of the world which shaped their views and their approach to intellectual discovery.

At one level this is a history of bewhiskered men, striding the colonial landscape with pompous self-assurance. It probably does not surprise us that these Fellows would not allow women to become members of their Society, even though it had been made Royal only by the Assent of Queen Victoria. As time went on the men, in a curt nod to the intellectual contribution of the “fairer sex,” would allow a few women to submit papers on the condition that they were read out on their behalf by one of their male colleagues.

In a sense this is a world we think we know through the popular depictions presented in novels, theatre, films, television and — increasingly popular — history podcasts. Through the swirling fog and dim gas lamps of countless movies we have glimpsed streets lined with horse-drawn carriages and heard the rustle of crinoline petticoats.

Yet, because of Coote's wonderful attention to just the right detail, we are allowed to comprehend the world that existed behind the memes. We come to understand the sense of self-improvement, scientific inquiry and genuine wonderment that drove the desire of colonists and founding fathers of the nation to meet in the Philosophical, Australian and Royal Societies; to pay fees commensurate with their status; and to write and publish papers for posterity.

It was not always intellectual ferment. Many meetings were so poorly attended that the Societies struggled to survive. In marked counterpoint, there were also glittering *Conversazioni* that were held on a grand scale (one, held in the Great Hall of Sydney University on 8 October 1884, provides a fine front cover to the book). In refined elegance, attendees would celebrate the contribution of intellectual endeavour to their shared belief in the untrammelled agricultural, industrial and cultural progress of a "new" land. To grace such occasions, each Fellow was allowed to invite two female relatives.

Here, then, in the words of Susan Pond in her Foreword, is no dry-as-dust cultural history but rather "a rollicking recital ... of the Society's fortunes and misfortunes, ebbs and flows, highs and lows." It is a compelling story. Through these pages we meet the inspired amateurs (avidly collecting their fossils, beetles and plants); the emerging

professionals (astronomers, surveyors, geologists, botanists and engineers); and, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in a sign of times to come, the academics.

They varied in character and intellectual capacity. Some were competitive and fiercely protective of their research. Others were more open in their approach to inquiry. Coote centres her history of the scientific establishment on the flesh, blood and temperament of the participants, not just on the ideas that they espoused. We meet real people, some snooty, some engaging, some dull, some respectable, some downright unethical but, nearly all of them, insatiably curious or at least feeling the need to behave so in front of others.

Such a colourful narrative should be enough to ask of a history of the emergence of the Royal Society of New South Wales. But between the covers of this absorbing book lies something else. History is more than a travel guide to a foreign country. In the words of another great novelist, the black American author, James Baldwin: "People are trapped in history and history trapped in them." History is not just a quaint place to visit. It has made the world in which we live today and beckons to the future which awaits.

In the view of an increasing number of Australian historians, the world that frames much of Coote's book — colonial society — has become embedded in a "colonialist" mentality that continues to permeate contemporary Australian society. It is argued that the ideas espoused by these pillars of the scientific and philosophical community more than a century ago help to explain the cultural assumptions that prevail today. The commitment to the European exploitation of a "new" country that underlay so many

of the activities of the Royal Society is now increasingly denounced by critics in terms of invasion, disposition and subjugation.

Aboriginal Australians have led the way in demanding that truth-telling about our history needs to be central to any meaningful reconciliation. And they are right. We need to look at our past with eyes wide open.

Understanding what motivated the members of the Royal Society is not a bad place to begin this task. Here are those — many, literally, colonists — who exemplified the Enlightenment values and progressive ideals of society, whilst holding fast to a range of deep-seated prejudices about racial and cultural differences. The book inspires one to go beyond the text and to follow the footnote trail.

Thanks to Coote, I discovered that the first paper to the newly formed Philosophical Society was to be presented by the surgeon and merchant, Alexander Berry. However, he was called upon to make an exploratory voyage to Batemans Bay and so the NSW Supreme Court Justice, Barron Field, stepped in.<sup>16</sup>

Field was a plump man who exuded a friendly demeanour although, in common with many of his counterparts, he was prone to fits of irascible jealousy on occasion. He made a major contribution to identifying new species of plants in NSW. Even today, one will often find the abbreviation, **B. Field**, in botanical literature. But his talk on this occasion was not about *Boronia anemonifolia*. Rather he took the opportunity to present his assessment of the “Aborigines of New

Holland and Van Diemen’s Land.” His talk was delivered on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1822.<sup>17</sup> I have now read that paper. It was discomforting.

Field hypothesised that the colony’s Aboriginal people were of Ethiopian origin. They were an inferior human species of degenerate character, not able to be civilised by any act of kindness by the newcomers. The local native peoples whom he had studied were, to his mind, barbarous savages, unashamed by their nakedness.

Field, who had met William Wordsworth, and took immodest pride in his banal poetry, concluded his address:

As in the eye of Nature he has lived  
So in the eye of Nature let him die.

That supposedly rationalist view, presented by a founding member of the Philosophical Society, is a confronting truth to face. But it is not the only truth. For, between 1821 and 1914, Society members sought on numerous occasions to understand the social structures, languages and cultures of the Aboriginal peoples with whom they had contact. The history, anthropology and societal treatment of Aboriginal peoples was a place of contested views and varied emotions.<sup>18</sup>

Most members shared Field’s view that the continent’s Indigenous people were doomed to extinction. However, whilst many accepted that conclusion with equanimity (and turned a blind eye to frontier wars and massacres), others, genuinely fascinated by Aboriginal cultures, were dismayed. There was a sense of loss. “Would that we had a record of what they really are before they

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16 See Clemens, 2018. [Ed.]

17 See Field (1825).

18 Readers might be interested to peruse the collection of papers on Aboriginal themes in the Society’s publications from 1822, at <https://www.royalsoc.org.au/aboriginal-html/> [Ed.]

pass away from among us,” concluded John Fraser, a headmaster from Maitland whose book, *The Aborigines of New South Wales*, won the Royal Society prize in 1882.

The amateur ethnologist, Robert Hamilton Mathews, was the Royal Society member who probably exhibited the most compulsive interest in Aboriginal culture. He published no fewer than 27 papers in the *Journal of the Royal Society* between 1893 to 1911. He was a dedicated researcher. Or perhaps not. Thanks to Coote, we also know that Mathews stands accused of stealing the intellectual property of others and presenting it as his own; routinely falsifying his field notes; and acting for his own pecuniary gain in his role as surveyor. He was a deeply flawed character.

Perhaps a more impressive witness to Aboriginal life was Mary Martha Everitt, the Mistress-in-Charge of Girls at the Superior Public School in Parramatta. Everitt, an admirer of Aboriginal culture, who talked to them extensively, almost single-handedly preserved much of the Gundungurra language for posterity. She was able to have her research presented to the Society by Mathews in 1900. Mathews published her paper as his own in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* the next year.<sup>19</sup> True to form, he gave no acknowledgement of Everitt’s research.<sup>20</sup>

For these insights, and many others, I am delighted that *Knowledge for a Nation* has been written. But, in truth, this thoughtful and readable history could have been aptly titled *Knowledge of a Nation*. It marks an important contribution to understanding

the hopes and disappointments, conflicts and camaraderie, challenges and achievements of the intellectual leadership of NSW, as the Society’s members sought to transplant the latest ideas from Europe to Australia. To a significant extent their views of the world seem a foreign place, yet many of their collective values continue to permeate the institutional and political structures of contemporary Australian society.

It is for that reason that it is imperative that we understand our history. We need to tell its truth with honesty. But Coote’s book, through its accumulated detail, shows that there was no single colonial truth. Ideas, social as well as scientific, were fiercely argued.

We need to embrace the demand of First Nations peoples for truth telling. But, in doing so, we need to remind ourselves that not only will the quest for truth always rely on conflicting interpretations of empirical evidence, but that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries — as in 2024 — people (with very different perspectives) argued fiercely about the ideas that framed their view of the world and the society that they wish to create. Coote’s history reminds us that the past was a place of contested truths. So will be the history by which that tale is told.

I recognise the foresight of John Hardie, former President of the Royal Society, who commissioned this history. I pay tribute to Davina Jackson who has worked tirelessly in recent months, leading the editorial and publication processes. It was a mighty effort.

But most of all I extol the energy and intellectual rigour that Anne Coote has

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<sup>19</sup> See Mathews (1901).

<sup>20</sup> See Illert (2001).

brought to this history. It represents years of work, often at significant personal cost. I hope that she knows that it has been worth it.

To potential readers — Royal Society members and beyond — I thoroughly recommend this book. Buy it. Read it. Think about it.

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