

A History of the Royal Society of Victoria

The **Royal Society of Victoria** is Victoria's oldest continuous scientific society. Established in 1854 (as the Philosophical Society of Victoria) its aim has been the promotion and advancement of science, and the dissemination of scientific information to the public.

In mid-1854 (3 years after the foundation of the Colony of Victoria and the discovery of gold in Victoria) two similar scientific societies with comparable aims were founded. First off the mark, on 31 July 1854, was the **Victorian Institute for the Advancement of Science (VIAS)**, modelled on the British Association of the Advancement of Science. The first president of the VIAS was renowned Victorian judge Sir Redmond Barry, who was the first Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, founder of the Melbourne Public Library, and later famous as the judge who condemned the bushranger Ned Kelly to hang.

Less than two weeks later, on 12 August, a second society was founded, the **Philosophical Society of Victoria (PSV)**, this society being modelled on the Royal Society of London. The PSV really owes its origins to the earlier efforts of Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe who, in the late 1840s, had urged the establishment a colonial museum and an allied academic society. In September 1853 the Victorian Legislative Council recommended that the Government should set aside funds for the establishment of a museum of natural history. The Government responded that the funds would be granted on condition that an associated society was also founded which would help institute Government policy and facilitate the running of the museum. Thus came into being the Philosophical Society of Victoria. The first president of the Philosophical Society was the able and energetic Surveyor-General of the Colony, Captain Andrew Clarke. One of the Society's original aims was, in due course, to become a colonial Royal Society.

Within twelve months the organisers of both societies, not without some reservations, but realizing that "the colony was hardly able to support adequately the two separate institutions having the same objects", agreed to amalgamate to form the **Philosophical Institute of Victoria (PIV)**, a compromise name derived from both precursor societies. The first meeting of the new amalgamated entity was held on 10 July 1855. The Philosophical Institute of Victoria continued operations under that title for the next four and a half years, until finally, in late 1859, royal assent was granted for a name change to the **Royal Society of Victoria (RSV)**. This was announced at a special meeting on 23 January 1860 by the outgoing President of the Philosophical Institute, Dr Ferdinand Mueller.

The Society developed and promoted Science in the fledgling colony, stimulating, fostering, and sustaining the development of astronomy, anthropology, agriculture, geology, botany, zoology, biology and other natural sciences, engineering, and meteorology, as well as supporting the establishment our first public utilities. No other colony in Australia achieved such a high level of organised Science in such a short time. For over 150 years the Royal Society of Victoria has continued to play a significant role in the growth of scientific endeavour, the dissemination of scientific knowledge and its technological application in the community. Although the Royal Society of Victoria was modeled on the Royal Society of London, from its beginnings membership was open to all and not restricted to professional scientists. The first female member, Helen Neild, was elected as an associate member in July 1889.

Some notable milestones that the Royal Society of Victoria was involved in include: sponsoring and organising **The Burke and Wills Expedition of 1860**; establishment of the National Museum of Natural History (now, Museum Victoria), the Melbourne Public Library (now, the State Library of Victoria) and the Bureau of Meteorology's weather station (still on-site); stimulating Australia's first Antarctic exploration; the setting-aside of Wilson's Promontory as a National Park; and the formation of the Victorian Institute of Marine Sciences. In 1854, the National Museum of Natural History was opened in the Government Assay Office, La Trobe Street, Melbourne. The first monthly meetings of the Philosophical Society were held in the museum and the PSV played a leading role in its early development. The first Curator in charge of the museum was **William Blandowski**, who also played a major part in the foundation of the Philosophical Society and in early scientific investigations. In 1857, Blandowski, accompanied by Gerard Krefft, and with the backing of the Victorian

Government and the Philosophical Institute, led a landmark year-long collecting expedition to the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers. It was Victoria's first significant exploring expedition.

In 1856 the National Museum collection was controversially transferred from the Government Assay Office to the University of Melbourne by **Frederick McCoy** where he was Professor of Natural Sciences. McCoy was a member of the Philosophical Institute and later, in 1864, President of the Royal Society. In 1856 he was appointed Government Palaeontologist, and in 1858, was appointed Director of the Museum. He was, at times, a contentious figure but played a key role in the development of early science in Victoria.

In 1856 Bavarian scientist and ship's officer, **Georg Neumayer** (later Vice-president of the Royal Society of Victoria), established an observatory at Flagstaff Hill (now the Flagstaff Gardens). He also organised a number of other observing stations throughout Victoria and in 1859 his efforts were rewarded when he was appointed Victoria's Government Astronomer. He returned to Germany and was instrumental in establishing their Meteorology service and was a strong advocate of polar exploration.

Early interest in the **Wilson's Promontory's** scientific attributes was shown by Dr **Ferdinand Mueller** who, as the first Government Botanist, visited Wilson's Promontory in March and April 1853. Mueller explored the east coast and north east coasts, collecting botanical specimens. After his appointment as Director of Melbourne's Botanic Gardens in 1857, he sent his foreman to collect further specimens from the Promontory. Mueller himself made another visit to the Promontory in 1874, this time collecting specimens from the Mt Oberon area. By the early 1900s the campaign to have this set aside a National Park was receiving wide public support, particularly from organisations like the Royal Society of Victoria, the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, the Royal Geographic Society, the Zoological and Acclimatisation Society, and the Australian Natives Association. Following a large deputation to the Premier, Cabinet agreed to the permanent reservation of 30,363 hectares as a site for a National Park, which was gazetted in March 1905.

The planning and briefing for the **Burke and Wills Expedition of 1860** were conducted in the Royal Society's building before they went to Royal Park to commence their epic and ill-fated journey. The bodies of Burke and Wills ended up back in the building where they lay in state prior to a State funeral, Victoria's first. They were buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery. The 150th anniversary of the Burke and Wills Expedition will be marked by a variety of activities from 2009 to 2012.

With the visit in March 1874 of **HMS Challenger** on an expedition funded by the Royal Society of London, the Royal Society of Victoria initiated its involvement in polar exploration, and the scientific leader of the expedition, Professor Wyville Thompson was made a life member of the Society. As a result of the *HMS Challenger* visit, by 1886 the Royal Society of Victoria had formed the Australian Antarctica Exploration Committee and the seeds were sown for later Australian participation in Antarctic expeditions.

In 2009 the Royal Society of Victoria was the co-organiser of the South Magnetic Pole Centenary commemorative flyover celebrating 100 years since Australians T.W. Edgeworth David, and Douglas Mawson, with Scotsman Alistair Mackay, located the South Magnetic Pole. They were the northern party of Shackleton's 1907-09 Antarctic expedition. The southern party got to within 97 miles of the South Pole, just three years before it was actually reached by Amundsen and Scott.

The Royal Society contributed to the development of Melbourne infra-structure including the scientific basis of early water reticulation, storm water and sewerage water. As our dependence on scientific development has increased, so too has the importance of the work of the Society in its promotion. Today we would assert that **"there is no saving the planet without science"**. Through its various publications, lectures and symposia, the Royal Society brings together scientists from diverse disciplines to stimulate discussion, and disseminate information for the benefit of the community.

The Society recognises and encourages scientific research of the highest calibre by the award of its coveted Medal. It elects scientists of great distinction as Fellows and provides an annual award of a research study grant to young researchers. In addition it publishes *Proceedings* for members and distributes additionally copies

internationally to like-minded institutions. It is one of the oldest Australian scientific journals, having been published continuously for over 150 years.

We are fortunate to be one of the few learned societies in Australia with its own building. The building was designed by renowned Melbourne architect **Joseph Reed** and built in 1859 specifically for the Royal Society of Victoria. It has been of great value as it is the focal point for our activities; it is our place to meet, our place to learn, and our place to debate contemporary scientific and cultural issues. It is a symbol of the importance of science and technology in our lives and of the Royal Society of Victoria's continuing role in the promotion of science and scientific endeavour.