

From gentlemen naturalists to professional scientists - the changing nature of the Linnean Society in Sydney

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In the early days of the colony of New South Wales most of the population were convicts or military. Both classes came mainly from the slums of London and Belfast and had little knowledge of natural history. Anything small and furry was a mouse, a bird with red on it was a robin, and a tree from which rustic furniture could be made was an oak, cedar or similar. As time went on and the population of free people increased, the number of people interested in intellectual pursuits increased. These people tended to form learned societies, the members of which were mainly military officers, medical doctors, engineers, landed gentry and a surprising number of clerics.

Two of the clerics stand out. Rev. Dunmore Lang had a lot to do with the introduction of the first megafauna fossils, from Wellington caves, to British science. The Catholic priest Tennyson Woods was an early president of the Linnean Society and presented a number of scientific papers to it. His geology of the south-east part of South Australia stands good today. He is however perhaps better remembered as the mentor of Mary Mackillop.

It is interesting to note that in the publications and membership lists of the early learned societies it is hard to find the names of any merchants. Presumably in these early days the pursuit of profit left little time for intellectual pursuits.

The members and active contributors to the early natural history societies were therefore all “amateurs”, although not in the sense we might use the word today. Many were doing basic research, and those of us who have followed on owe these Gentlemen Naturalists a debt of recognition. Up until about 1870 the only person I can find who held an official position in any of these societies by virtue of biological qualifications was the Curator of the Australian Museum.

The first group formed with an interest in natural science was the Philosophical Society. It was formed in 1821. Their first publication did not appear until 1866 and contained only two biological papers, the rest indicating that the focus of the society was on mechanics, astronomy, geology and such. The Philosophical Society was to become the Royal Society, which is still active in Sydney today.

The first biological society was not formed until 40 years after the Philosophical/Royal Society. This was the Entomological Society, a small group of men who held their first meeting in Sydney in May of 1862. In the papers of their first meeting they note that the Royal Society paid little attention to biology. This small group petered out by 1873, but they did produce several publications. Their first “Transactions” was published in 1861 and was the first scientific publication in Australia. The records and publications of this society



William Macleay, the founder of the Linnean Society and gentleman naturalist. Fortunately a gentleman with deep pockets.

were to be taken up by the Linnean Society, and copies of the “Transactions of the Entomological Society” can still be obtained from the Linnean Society (PO Box 82, Kingsford NSW 2032).

The mover behind the formation of the Entomological Society was William Macleay, a most interesting man. He was certainly of the landed gentry, from a rich family. He was an MP, a keen fisherman and a man with a passionate interest in insects. However he disliked the Royal Society, of which he was a member. These are his own words from the minutes of the first AGM of the Linnean Society:

“The Royal Society is a well-established society possessing ample funds and having a long list of subscribers, and a number of valuable papers have been read at its meetings. But mingled with these scientific papers have been others not of a scientific character and certainly possessing no interest except of a local kind.

The publication of proceedings have also been conducted without the celerity and regularity to be expected from a society not deficient in means, and it is that irregularity and uncertainty in publication which makes it, as a society, useless as a record of zoological, botanical or geological discovery”

I suspect there might be more between the lines, as it is quite clear from other records that he thought the Royal Society might let in riffraff, even women.

Following the quiet demise of the Entomological Society, the Linnean Society of New South Wales was established. At a meeting called by William Macleay in 1874 the rules and regulations of the new society were adopted. The purpose of the society was stated to be “The cultivation and study of the science of natural history in all its branches”. This remains the motto of the Linnean Society of New South Wales today.

The venerable Royal Zoological Society was founded in 1879, and it seems odd that a new society concerned with natural history should be formed when zoology was clearly within the area of interest of the Linnean Society. Was this another conflict of personalities?

The answer is that the Royal Zoological Society actually started out as an acclimatisation society. This is very clear because in the circular announcing the first meeting, it is

stated as “A meeting of an acclimatisation society”. However when they met on the 24th of March 1879, a motion to establish the name “New South Wales Acclimatisation Society” lapsed because someone pointed out that there already was such a society although it was defunct.

Their purpose was very clear, even though the name was changed to the “Zoological Society”, because they purchase and release, according to their own records, “Pheasants, quails, skylarks, goldfinches, bulbuls, horned owls and 5,000 brown trout ova”. A very, very busy group of people. They also sent skylarks and starlings to the mayors of Bathurst, Goulburn, Parramatta, Penrith and West Maitland. I suggest that the gratitude for the gift of starlings has diminished amongst those mayors today.

The focus of the Zoological Society changed very much from release to captivity when it established the zoo, first at Moore Park. For the following years the society was mainly concerned with running the zoo. I do not think the Zoological Society was really concerned with the natural history of the Sydney region until publication of the “Australian Zoologist” in 1914.

Meanwhile the Linnean Society was very much concerned with scientific publication. William Macleay made it clear from the beginning that this was one of the main reasons for establishing the Linnean Society. However in the first volume (1876) almost all the papers are about places far from Sydney, especially the South Pacific because Macleay actually financed a number of expeditions to the region. There are two papers about Sydney, both by Pierson Ramsay, who was the curator of the Australian Museum.

The first Ramsay paper lists the native game birds which were on sale in the Sydney markets, which is a very interesting list for ornithologists. His argument is not that these native species should not be on sale; his argument is that since Sydney already has all these game birds, why do the acclimatisation people want to introduce others? His second paper is important in terms of conservation because he lists the game and other native birds in the Sydney region which he feels should be protected by inclusion in the Game Protection Act. A conservation ethic was beginning to appear in the Linnean Society.

The second volume of the “Proceedings” has more papers on the South Pacific and only one locally, about molluscs found in Port Jackson. In the third volume there are several papers on fish from Port Jackson. This trend continues for a number of years, however there is a mass of local information elsewhere in the early publications. These “Proceedings” are in fact the written records, almost the minutes, of the monthly meetings of the society. At the end of the record of each meeting there is a section called “Exhibits”. These do not appear in the Tables of Contents nor in the Indices, but they contain interesting information about items members have brought to exhibit. Sometimes they are simply oddities like elephant’s foot waste baskets, but more usually they

are items from someone’s neighbourhood. There are fish from Port Jackson and insects from the backyard. I suspect that a survey of flora and fauna of the Sydney region in the late 1800s could be compiled from these records.

Even by 1890, in volume 5 of the “Proceedings”, a new trend is emerging. Of the 50 papers in that volume, seven are written by people who are professional biologists or have biological training. There was an assistant zoologist from the Australian Museum; an assistant zoologist from the Queensland Museum; a palaeontologist from the Australian Museum; J.H. Maiden, curator of the Technological Museum; Edgeworth David, from the Department of Mines; W.A. Haswell, a professor of biology; and Baron von Mueller PhD.

By 1900 all of the above are still publishing in the “Proceedings” (volume 25), and other familiar names appear as authors, such as G.A. Waterhouse and J.T. Wilson. There is clearly a dramatic increase in the “professionalism” of natural history studies.

Leaping forward to 1950, in that year the Linnean Society publications include only two authors that do not have an institutional affiliation as indicated by their addresses. Research has now passed almost completely from the Gentlemen Naturalists. Indeed, in contrast to the volumes of the 19th century, there are quite a few women authors in 1950; Judith Harker and Gwenda Davis from the University of New England; Muriel Morris, a Linnean Society Macleay Fellow in Zoology; Valerie May, a Linnean Fellow in Zoology; Mary Hindmarsh, a Linnean Fellow in Botany; Frances Hackney, Dorothy Shaw, Adele Millard, Kathleen English and Hillary Purchase from the University of Sydney; and Joan Crockford from the National Herbarium of NSW.

In the last 15 volumes of the “Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales”, which I have edited, there has only been one consistent author who is neither a student nor a professional scientist.

With this shift in authors of scientific papers has come the same shift in membership of the Linnean Society. The focus and nature of the society has shifted, but in that time the focus of the Royal Zoological Society has also changed.

The Royal Zoological Society has come to initiate as well as publish many studies of natural history in the Sydney region. The Mammal Section of the RZS carried out many surveys in the region; surveys were made in Ku-ring-gai Chase, in Manly Dam Reserve and many other remnant and surrounding bushlands. Meetings of sections of the RZS and symposia such as this one attract a wide variety of people, not unlike the public meetings of the societies of the 19th century. Much credit must be given to the current editor of the RZS, Dan Lunney, for inspiring and publishing papers on management and conservation. Indeed we all owe a debt of gratitude to the RZS for its continuing contribution to the study and conservation of wildlife in the Sydney Region through all its activities.