

RESURRECTION: THE CREATION HISTORY OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF TASMANIA'S NORTHERN BRANCH

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(with four plates)

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The date 27 June 1921 holds special significance for those in the north dedicated to the advancement of knowledge as it marks the inaugural lecture of the newly formed Northern Branch of the Royal Society of Tasmania. Yet, as will be demonstrated, this organisation was not undergoing creation but a reincarnation from its earlier counterpart. Knowledge of the first Branch and its activities is poorly known other than it originally flourished then faded into obscurity. Nevertheless, this group of dedicated enthusiasts persisted and today hold a special place in the story of the development of scientific bodies in the north of Tasmania including the nineteenth-century movement towards the establishment of public museums. As with all progressive endeavours, there were pivotal figures who stood out for the part they played in shaping events. Their names can be found in the following discussion.

Key Words: Royal Society of Tasmania, Northern Branch, Tasmanian history, museums.

THE TASMANIAN NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

The history of the Northern Branch of the Royal Society of Tasmania does not begin in 1921 when the current body was established but several decades earlier when an offshoot of the parent organisation was formed in 1853 by some of Launceston's most prominent citizens. Leading figures in its creation were local businessman William Henty and the naturalist Ronald Campbell Gunn, the latter of whom became Honorary Secretary (plate 1). The emergence of this Branch was part of a progression that reached back as far as 1838 when the Tasmanian Natural History Society (as it was called) was founded by the then Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land, Sir John Franklin, with meetings being held at his official residence in Hobart Town.

Gunn had first visited Government House in mid-1837 and was much taken with the vice-regal couple. He later relayed that the new Lieutenant-Governor and his wife were '...sincerely desirous of forwarding the Cause of Natural History in this Colony...' by encouraging and supporting scientific research (Burns & Skemp 1961, p. 71). A society was being formed and Jane Franklin was occupied buying land for the establishment of a garden of indigenous plants. Gunn, himself an avid collector of botanical specimens, was soon absorbed into the circle of amateur scientists surrounding the Franklins and became a valued associate. The northern-based naturalist was also active locally, being instrumental in the setting up of the Launceston Horticultural Society in July 1838, an organisation today

recognised as the longest continuously running horticultural society in Australia (*Launceston Advertiser* 20 Sept. 1838, p. 1; Mead 1960s, Sheridan 2013).

In 1841, the Tasmanian Natural History Society took an important step towards wider recognition when the first number of *The Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science*,



PLATE 1 — Statue of Ronald Campbell Gunn in the old Launceston Horticultural Society's grounds (now City Park). (Photograph: L. Ross)

Agriculture, Statistics, &c was published. An introduction by the Reverend John Lillie described the founding of the Society; how a philosophical group had been created by a few individuals to assist each other with the study of the natural history of the island. Once a fortnight they met in the library of Government House where papers were given, and these later became the material for the journal that resulted from the encouragement of their patron, Sir John Franklin. While the object of the journal was to present original material relating to the natural history and physics of the island with a concentration on botany, zoology, meteorology and geology, the content was not restricted to Van Diemen's Land and featured other Australian colonies, New Zealand, Antarctic regions and elsewhere as well as including a wide range of related subjects such as travel and exploration (Lillie 1842, Plomley 1969).

The Tasmanian Natural History Society was much grieved by the recall of their founder in 1843 and, as it turned out, the members were right to bewail Franklin's departure as they lost more than their friend and patron. His replacement, Sir Eardley-Wilmot, in an effort to defray the costs of maintaining the gardens at Hobart Town, founded the rival Botanical and Horticultural Society of Van Diemen's Land with the aim to "develop the physical character of the Island and illustrate its natural history and productions". The next year under royal patronage the name was changed to the Royal Society of Van Diemen's Land for Horticulture, Botany and the Advancement of Science and, after a few more adjustments, became the present-day Royal Society of Tasmania. Eardley-Wilmot's attempts to incorporate the Tasmanian Natural History Society were so tactless that the headquarters was relocated to Launceston where Gunn, its most active member, lived. He remained secretary and editor of the journal until 1848 when the Society finally amalgamated with the Royal Society of Tasmania under another Lieutenant-Governor, Sir William Denison (Piesse 1913, Burns & Skemp 1961, pp. 111–112). Yet, the departure of the Tasmanian Natural History Society from the scene proved not to be the end of Gunn's efforts to surround himself with like-minded enthusiasts.

CREATION OF THE NORTHERN BRANCH

The first sign of an attempt to establish a branch in the north was in September 1853 when an advertisement appeared in *The Launceston Examiner* stating the intention of forming an association, either independently or as an offshoot of the island's Royal Society. Those interested, including already existing members of the latter residing in the vicinity of the town, were requested to attend on the 26th of that month at Franklin Lodge, located within the main gates of what is now City Park (*The Launceston Examiner* 24 Sept. 1853, p. 999). This gathering, chaired by William Henty, resolved to approach the Council of the Royal Society in the capital to explore the possibility of setting up a branch. Permission was duly granted and the first assembly in the north, convened on 28 October, saw the election of officers

and membership proposals forwarded to the southern headquarters for approval (*The Launceston Examiner* 27 Sept. 1853, p. 1011; 22 Oct. 1853, p. 1; 15 Nov. 1853, p. 78). Appointed as Honorary Secretary was R.C. Gunn (*The Launceston Examiner* 17 Nov. 1853, p. 1).

Unfortunately, the minutes of the earliest meetings of the Northern Branch have not survived, however, reports often appeared in the local newspapers and these accounts contain interesting snippets of information that do much to reveal intentions as well as activities. The group initially decided to meet monthly at Franklin Lodge; meteorological instruments recently arrived in the island were to be forwarded from the capital and observations taken in the Launceston Horticultural Society's gardens; the donation of specimens of minerals and curious coins was acknowledged; and noted was the need for presses and other equipment to form the nucleus of a museum. The year 1856 was significant for the purchase of a Tennant's geological cabinet with an assortment of minerals, rocks and fossils, a prestigious acquisition that caused much excitement amongst colleagues (*The Launceston Examiner* 8 May 1856, pp. 2–3; 29 Dec. 1857, p. 3) (plate 2).

EXHIBITIONS

Members in the north also found themselves being swept up in wider global matters. The nineteenth century had seen a flowering and popularisation of international exhibitions and world fairs centred around industry and culture. Parliamentary proceedings indicate the Tasmanian Government was content to leave the showcasing of the island's products at these events to the Royal Society and allocated funds accordingly (*Colonial Times and Tasmanian* 29 April 1854, p. 2). Both north and south responded by forming committees to consider, collect and forward items to France for the Paris Exhibition (*The Launceston Examiner* 28 Mar. 1854, p. 2; 20 Apr. 1854, p. 2; 4 May 1854, p. 2). A report of the Tasmanian Commissioner to the Paris Exhibition reveals the exhibits comprised of ores and minerals, wheat, wool, flour, Tasmanian wood (both in plank and manufactured form) and cabinets of algae and insects attracted much interest. It also drew the attention of Professor John Wilson, the Director of Raw Produce from the Crystal Palace, now relocated to Sydenham after its spectacular success as an exhibition venue at Hyde Park in 1851. His letter written in September 1855 requesting samples from Tasmania for display was reproduced in the press and Launceston members soon found themselves deliberating on their contribution (*The Launceston Examiner* 21 Feb. 1856, p. 2). Although Wilson listed minerals, vegetable and animal products as being desirable, he had also noted the value of maps, diagrams, pictures or anything else that would illustrate the colony and its potential. The success of an artwork depicting Hobart Town at Paris led the Northern Branch to concentrate on the attracting of immigrants to the colony. Thus, in September 1858 it was resolved to commission a painting of Launceston and an advertisement was duly formulated seeking artists to



PLATE 2 — Tennant's Geology Cabinet (QVM:1957:40:11). James Tennant (1808–1879), renowned mineralogist to the Queen who ran an import and dealership in shells, minerals and other items from his London address, specialised in the preparation and sale of educational boxed sets of geological specimens. Those that have survived are his legacy. The cabinet shown here is in the collections at QVMAG. (Photograph: David Maynard, Senior Curator Natural Sciences QVMAG)

present sketches of a scene. The successful contender was John McKirdy Nelson, and in February 1859 his view of Launceston and the valley of the Tamar from Westbury Road was completed and shown to members at Franklin Lodge (*The Launceston Examiner* 9 Sept. 1858, p. 1; 21 Oct. 1858, p. 2; 17 Feb. 1859, p. 3; *Cornwall Chronicle* 18 Sept. 1858, p. 4; Kerr 1992, p. 566). After being displayed to the public at the Cornwall Assembly Rooms, it was sent to Hobart Town to be exhibited before being shipped to England at the end of June on the *Isabella Brown*.

THE FIRST BRANCH WITHERS

Despite these signs of vitality, newspaper reports of the activities of the Northern Branch were dwindling towards the end of the decade. According to the memoirs of Henry Button, former Mayor of Launceston, written near the end of his life, the first Northern Branch had become defunct by the 1850s and he was part of an attempt to revive it in the early 1860s (Button 1909, pp. 314–316). His recollections have tended to muddy the waters surrounding the history of the Branch and some clarification is necessary. As spasmodic notices and accounts of proceedings can be found in the local press throughout the 1850s, it appears Button is mistaken. It could be said, however, that a brief revival occurred around 1862 when members set up a museum, mainly of specimens of geology and mineralogy, in an upper room of the recently erected public buildings in St John Street (plate 3). A precious fragment of the minutes of the meetings held there has survived detailing some of the arrangements for the display (plate 4). Despite this, maintaining supporters and momentum became difficult and sometime during the 1860s the struggle was lost, and the Northern Branch

became defunct. The museum remained as its legacy until 1879 when the Launceston Mechanics' Institute, busy establishing its own museum, retrieved the remaining items and purchased the exhibition cases (QVMAG Records Launceston Mechanics' Institute).

Solomon Walker-Bowd in his thesis on the history of the Northern Branch has identified some of the causes for its early failure including the departure of Sir William Denison as Governor, gold rushes on the mainland leading to subsequent emigration, the Depression, and the demographic breakdown of the north that limited membership of such an elite society (Walker-Bowd 2013, pp. 8–10). Button acknowledges that the numbers were too small, and activities declined from want of attendance. Added to this were economic factors. Mention is made in January 1862 of the great number of subscriptions unpaid from the previous year and alternative sources of funding were being considered. Indications are that few new supporters were being admitted, leaving the small group of members to fall back on their own resources (QVMAG Minutes of RST Launceston Branch, 10 Jan. 1862). With its demise the intellectual gap was filled in the north by the Launceston Mechanics' Institute, a body that had been in existence since 1842 but whose focus was more aligned to working-class education (Petrov 1998, <http://launcestonmechanicsinstitute.blogspot.com/p/v-behaviorurldefaultvml0.html>). More serious scientific endeavour was later boosted by the pursuits of the town's public museum (now known as the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery or QVMAG) when it opened in 1891.



PLATE 3 — The public buildings in St John Street where a small museum was established in the upper rooms in 1862. (Photograph: L. Ross)

REVIVAL OF THE NORTHERN BRANCH

No further action was taken to revive interest in the Society in the north until early 1921 when historian, member of the Royal Society of Tasmania, archivist, librarian and government publicity officer, John Moore-Robinson, visited Launceston to assess what records of historical significance could be found. To his surprise he discovered a wealth of material which prompted him to write a letter to *The Examiner* suggesting that either a historical society or a branch of the state's Royal Society be set up to encourage and provide opportunities for research. *The Examiner* embraced the cause, voicing in print a preference for an offshoot of the latter, as it agreed this would give a broader scope for scientific subjects and thus attract more support (*The Examiner* 28 Apr. 1921, p. 4, p. 8).

From that point on events progressed rapidly and decisively indicating that Launceston was more than ready for such a move. The formation of a Northern Branch was discussed by the Council of the Royal Society of Tasmania in early May and the idea was greeted with general approval. It was noted that due process, in accordance with the rules, needed to be followed but if the proposal was ever presented it would receive the support of all members (*The Examiner* 11 May 1921, p. 4; *The Mercury* 28 May 1921, p. 6). 'Due process' required nominated persons to

join the Society and then formally request that a branch be established. The Council also observed that although membership had recently increased during the post-war years, this would give a welcome boost to numbers and strengthen the whole organisation. (Newspaper reports indicate the membership numbered 82 in 1917 but with the increase since and the additional numbers from the establishment of the Northern Branch, the figure would reach around 200.)

On 11 May, a group of interested citizens met in Launceston and decided to arrange a further gathering of invited participants to assess the level of enthusiasm. This took place on 18 May where it was proposed that a branch be formed, and the proper steps be taken to carry it into effect. The motion, put by H.H. Scott, Curator of the town's museum, was seconded by the Launceston member for parliament, the Honourable T. Shields, and then carried. Many of those present were nominated for membership with more following suit in the days after (*The Examiner* 19 May 1921, p. 8; *The Mercury* 28 May 1921, p. 8). To hasten proceedings, at the end of May the Royal Society convened a special general meeting in Hobart to deal with just under 40 nominations from Launceston.

The last step was taken on 10 June when members, most of whom were new, passed a resolution that a Northern Branch be created. A request was sent to the Royal Society

Minutes of the Royal Society's (Launceston Branch) Meetings held in the Museum Launceston -

1862

10th Jan. 1862.

Present

Mess^{rs} R. C. Gunn (Chairman), Cleveland, Falconer, H. Bulton, C. Bulton, Adams, and Stephens.

The Treasurer (Mr. Cleveland) called attention to the great number of subscriptions yet unpaid for the past year.

It was suggested by Mr. Falconer, that the Chairman should be requested to ascertain whether any income arising from the estate of the Franklin Museum at Ancaathe could be made available for the purposes of the Northern branch of the Royal Society.

The secretary laid before the Meeting plans for the arrangement of the Museum with sketches of the chief articles of furniture that would be required, and was authorized to take the necessary steps for procuring tenders from respectable tradesmen in Hobart Town & Launceston.

Two large crystals of smoky quartz, with specimens of silicified wood, from Flinders' Island were exhibited; presented by Capt. Mr. S. Smith. (cont.)

PLATE 4 — Minutes of Northern Branch meeting held 10 January 1862 (copy held in the QVMAG Community History Room). (Photograph: L. Ross)

in Hobart and permission was given for the formation of a branch with the headquarters in Launceston on 13 June. At this meeting it was also resolved to send a letter to Mr Rolph, proprietor of *The Examiner*, thanking him for his hard work leading to its establishment (*The Examiner* 11 June 1921, p. 8; *The Mercury* 14 June 1921, p. 8). Meanwhile, with due process now completed on the 10

June, northern members turned their attention to the official opening and first lecture, an event they wished to stage on the earliest convenient date before the end of the month.

At 8 pm on 27 June 1921 the inaugural meeting of the new Branch was held at the Launceston Mechanics' Institute. The Secretary of the Royal Society, Clive Lord, outlined the history of the organisation and the Governor

of Tasmania, Sir William Allardyce, opened proceedings to an audience of members and the public with a speech that time has shown to be nothing less than prophetic.

“In a new land there is no limit to the possibilities of research. Tasmania is a country of infinite resources and of immense possibilities. Only the fringe of them has yet been touched. There is much of interest in regard to its past. There is even more of usefulness as well as of interest in the investigation of what its people can make of its future. Launceston is the centre of the mining industry of the state. For the present that branch of activity is rather under a cloud, but it is not always going to be so. Launceston is the headquarters of the geological survey. Thus, in geology alone there is a most promising opening for “the advancement of knowledge.” Many other “ologies” could be mentioned. There is no end to them nowadays. As to what the branch will take up with most enthusiasm depends largely upon the types and the tastes of its membership. In the selection of a committee the aim was, and wisely, to make it as thoroughly representative as possible of the varying interests. The new branch commences its career under the happiest auspices. We can only express the hope that it will realise the expectations of its founders. It is seventy years since the first attempt at a northern branch of the Royal Society was made. It was long before its time. The branch soon withered and died. The conditions are now very different. What in 1853 was impossible should to-day be quite easy of accomplishment. And so we believe it will be found.” (The Examiner 28 June 1921, p. 4).

A paper, illustrated by specially prepared lantern slides and maps, was then read by the government geologist, Loftus Hills. The subject, of which he had first-hand experience, was the application of science to war on the western front with special reference to the secret of the Messines mines and the conquest of the German submarine by science (*The Mercury* 13 Sept. 1921, p. 6). During the first year, lectures were given on a variety of subjects including astronomy, psychology, evolution, exploration and the scientific application of the stereoscope. Members also threw their efforts into the attempt to establish Cradle Mountain as a national reserve and oversaw the public meetings held in Launceston to support this movement.

MUSEUMS – FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

Nineteenth-century collectors in Tasmania were almost solely focused on the natural sciences such as geology, botany and zoology with the emphasis on describing, naming and cataloguing the many new species being discovered. A small number of these collections evolved into the earliest museums, albeit they were privately run with admission fees often charged. In the south, the largest institution was that owned by the Royal Society of Tasmania with a building being erected in 1863 to house the collections. In 1885 this museum passed into the hands of the government and

later became known as the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG).

In Launceston, the Northern Branch had brought together items, including a small library of scientific works, with the intention to create a museum as in the south. This assemblage, mainly consisting of geological and botanical specimens, was transferred to the newly erected public buildings in 1862. Surviving minutes of meetings dated that year give some details of the setting up of this museum, including the purchase of display cases. A library was also established in the building at the same time indicating the public nature of this structure.

In 1879 the Launceston Mechanics’ Institute investigated the Northern Branch museum as they were resolved to establish their own. This organisation, with the help of the Royal Society of Tasmania, had also accumulated objects since its inception in the 1840s. To their dismay it was discovered that although the Tennant’s geology cabinet was still present, many of the other items were missing. They purchased the display cases, and any remnants of the old museum were doubtless incorporated into the Mechanics’ Institute collection at this time. Originally the Mechanics’ Institute utilised the same room in the public buildings, but this proved to be a short-lived measure, and by January 1881 the exhibits had been relocated to their own building where a wing was later built to house them.

With the completion of a purpose-built museum in 1891, the Mechanics’ Institute handed the contents of their own repository over to the Launceston City Council to form the basis of the collections at QVMAG. The evidence indicates the display cases initially purchased by the Northern Branch, and then by the Launceston Mechanics’ Institute, were passed on to QVMAG.

During the twentieth century, many of the curators at QVMAG were members of the Royal Society of Tasmania, including the first, H.H. Scott, renowned for many achievements including his contribution to the study of Tasmanian megafauna. The Northern Branch formed in 1921 created even firmer ties with QVMAG when it moved from the Launceston Mechanics’ Institute to the museum in 1937 where meetings have been held ever since, for many years at Royal Park and latterly at the new site of Inveresk. The Northern Branch has continued to foster a strong and close relationship with the museum, something exemplified by the centenary gift in 2020 of a cabinet to house the recently donated Knight-Lambkin butterfly collection.

CONCLUSION

The history of the first Northern Branch and its contribution to the intellectual landscape of nineteenth-century Tasmania has not been widely recognised. Although in existence for only a short period it played its part as a precursor in the attempt to establish a scientific body in the north of Tasmania for an elite group of educated amateur scientists eager to study and understand the wonders of the natural world that surrounded them. Additionally, while the connection

between the Royal Society museum and TMAG in Hobart is well-defined, the situation in Launceston has been more obscured. As has been demonstrated, historically the development of public museums in the north during the nineteenth century reveals there was an evolutionary chain linking the Northern Branch, the Launceston Mechanics' Institute and QVMAG.

Finally, the original Northern Branch established in 1853 has left its mark with its history perceived as fractured, often represented as a long sleep, followed by a reawakening. This reality has impacted on the arrangements for the centenary in 2021, when the Northern Branch celebrates not 100 years of existence, but of continuous operation.

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