

TRANSACTIONS  
OF THE  
ROYAL SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

GENERAL

Vol. 2

No. 6

May 15, 1968

The Royal Society of New Zealand—  
A Century of Scientific Endeavour

By C. A. FLEMING

[*Centennial Lecture, delivered in the Town Hall Concert Chamber, Wellington, on Wednesday, October 11, 1967; received by the Editor, November 14, 1967.*]

THE Royal Society of New Zealand is 100 years old. For a century, the Society, with its predecessor, the New Zealand Institute, has laboured for the promotion of science. Its achievements are considerable. The work done by a body corporate springs largely from the endorsement by the majority of the wisdom and energy of its individual members. "So now let us praise famous men and our fathers that begat us." A centennial is the occasion to acknowledge our debt, as New Zealanders and as scientists, to those who founded the Society, guided its policies, led it to new endeavours, overcame its frustrations. "And some there be which have no memorial." They are not forgotten in our history, but you can't use the same net to catch plankton and whales, and this afternoon we go a-whaling.

Organised New Zealand colonisation by the New Zealand Company followed the Wakefield plan. The colonist communities were planned as a cross-section of British society, including educated men who brought an interest in learning, scholarship and enquiry. The separate colonies were distant from each other, communication remained poor, and each had to be self-sufficient. Many New Zealand institutions began provincially, and domination by any one centre was intolerable. So when national organisations became necessary, the pattern was federal. This applied at first to government itself, later to the University, and the federal pattern came naturally, too, for science.

We may note the formation of the Nelson Literary and Scientific Institution in 1841 on the ship *Whitby* that conveyed the colonists to an unknown destination, mainly because of inclusion of the word "scientific" in its title, but also because the Nelson Institute later played its part in our history. In Wellington, at Governor Grey's "suggestion and with his every encouragement and assistance"<sup>1</sup>, the *New Zealand Society* was established in 1851, languished, was revived seven years later, and languished again<sup>2</sup>. Then, in Christchurch, von Haast founded the *Philosophical Institute of Canterbury* in 1862<sup>3</sup>. These bodies were enthusiastic if small, they held meetings, but they could not afford to publish the papers read before them.

The New Zealand Society, with Government sympathy and help, aspired to be national, but failed to maintain continuity, let alone to widen its support to other centres. Its keen young officers included Walter Mantell, son of Gideon, the discoverer of the Iguanodon of the Sussex Downs, one of the first giant dinosaurs

---

Published by the Royal Society of New Zealand, c/o Victoria University of Wellington, P.O. Box 196, Wellington.