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J. A. Thomson's Proposals for Reform of the New Zealand  
Institute in 1917—A Chapter in the History of the  
Royal Society of New Zealand

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*Abstract*

THOMSON'S 1917 proposals for reform of the New Zealand Institute, here published for the first time, arose from wartime attempts to stimulate science in the British dominions. It involved establishment of a Fellowship restricted to "the most competent scientific men of the Dominion" who should elect the executive, the continued affiliation of local scientific institutions with reduced responsibilities, and the holding of public meetings of the Institute to draw public attention to the progress of science. Several of Thomson's far-sighted proposals were implemented during the next fifty years.

INTRODUCTION

At the Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the New Zealand Institute on January 30, 1917, Dr James Allan Thomson gave a notice of motion for the reform of the New Zealand Institute (*Trans. N.Z. Inst.* 49: 542). Thomson's father, George Malcolm Thomson, M.L.C. (1848-1933), was a staunch supporter of the Otago Institute from its early years, an early advocate of reform during the Hector period of the New Zealand Institute's history, a member of the Board of Governors from 1903 to 1933, and the third elected President (1907-08) of the Institute (see Benham, 1935). J. A. Thomson, New Zealand's first Rhodes Scholar, returned to New Zealand after post-graduate work at Oxford and on the West Australian gold-fields to become the first paleontologist at the New Zealand Geological Survey in 1911. In 1914 he succeeded A. Hamilton as Director of the Dominion Museum, Wellington, and thus became the leading scientific adviser to the New Zealand Government (see Speight, 1929).

The imminence of a world war had drawn the attention of the Imperial and Dominion governments to the deficiencies in the organisation of science in the British Empire, in contrast to its efficiency in Germany. By an Order in Council dated July 28, 1915, Great Britain had established a Committee and an Advisory Council for the organisation and development of state-aided scientific and industrial

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research, following the presentation of a parliamentary paper on the subject. The governments of New South Wales and Victoria had suggested that the British scheme be applied to the Dominions, and in March, 1916, the Secretary of State for the Colonies forwarded a Privy Council Memorandum on the matter to the New Zealand Government. It was referred to the University of New Zealand and to the Board of Science and Art, and reached Thomson as a member of that Board.

Thomson's family background, his personal research, and his overseas experience made him well aware of the inadequacies of the organisation of scientific research in New Zealand in 1916. He prepared a 38-page report on the reorganisation and promotion of state-sponsored scientific research and an appendix on Reform of the New Zealand Institute. The report was not forwarded to the Minister of Internal Affairs until July 20, 1917, but an early version of his views on the Reform of the New Zealand Institute was presented as a notice of motion to the Institute in January, and was referred to the affiliated Societies. From comments published in the *Proceedings*, in the address of the President, Professor W. B. Benham (1918), and in the reports of incorporated societies, it can be inferred that Thomson's proposals involved a new kind of membership—Fellows—and (in its original version) a change of name of existing "members" who were to be designated "associates". The proposal to establish a Fellowship met general approval, but Thomson's full scheme went far beyond the proposal for a purely honorific Fellowship. It was never published, and has been the subject of some speculation (Fleming, 1964). Thomson's report is here presented as a contribution to the history of science in New Zealand. It contains frank criticisms of the Institute as it began its second half century, by an active scientist on its Council, such as are naturally lacking in the Institute's own *Proceedings*.

Copies of Thomson's original proposal may be preserved in the archives of the Royal Society of New Zealand, which are unfortunately inaccessible, and in the records preserved by the incorporated societies. The following, which may be a somewhat modified version, is taken from Appendix I in a copy of Thomson's report to the Minister of Internal Affairs that was forwarded to the Auckland Institute under cover of a letter dated September 12, 1917, from B. C. Aston as Honorary Secretary of the New Zealand Institute. Aston's letter states that Thomson's report was to be used merely as a basis for discussion in forwarding the objectives of the New Zealand Institute's Scientific and Industrial Research Committee (which had been set up in 1916 to advise the wartime National Efficiency Board) and that it had not received the imprimatur of the Institute's Standing Committee. It is published with only minor editorial alterations (in punctuation and by using italics for the *Transactions*).

#### "REFORM OF THE NEW ZEALAND INSTITUTE"

"There are two significant facts that in themselves suggest the need of a reform of the New Zealand Institute. The first of these is the state of its membership, clearly shown by the accompanying graph.\* After its formation in 1868, the Institute increased in membership more rapidly in proportion than the total population, reaching its highest level, 1305, in the year 1884, when the population was 565,304. From that date the membership of the Institute steadily declined until in 1899 it was 609, the population meanwhile having increased to 756,505. An increase in membership again set in about 1904, the date of operation of the Amendment Act which gave greater powers of self government to the Institute, and in 1913 the membership had reached 1187. This increase, however, may be ascribed mainly to two causes independent of the constitution of the Institute. One was the special campaign made by the Auckland Institute, which controls the Auckland Museum, for greater public support for its Museum; the other was the formation of tech-

\* Not preserved with the copy used.

nological sections in the Otago Institute and Wellington Philosophical Society. Even with the rapid increase between 1904 and 1913, the total membership was still short of the total of 1884, and in the meanwhile the population of the country had nearly doubled, and in the last two years the membership has fallen off again. This analysis therefore shows that the New Zealand Institute has received a relatively decreasing amount of public support since 1884.

“The second significant fact is the financial position of the Institute. The statutory grant of £500 from the Government has remained the same since 1868, in spite of repeated requests from the Institute for its enlargement. The Institute now shows a deficit, and cannot publish the increasing amount of research carried out by its members. The refusal of successive governments to increase the grant, and of wealthy citizens to endow the Institute, again prove that it does not receive the public support that might be expected for the premier scientific society of the Dominion.

“The lessening hold of the Institute on public support suggests that in its turn the Institute does not serve as an efficient agent of popular education in science. It may be held by many of its members that this is not a primary function of the Institute, but the advancement of science is an expressed function of all the constituent local societies, and it is obvious that the Institute cannot do much for the encouragement of research without carrying the public with it.

“The Government grant of £500 has been a most efficient, and for the Government an exceedingly cheap way of encouraging research, and it is now insufficient for that purpose alone. If the Institute is to break new ground in attempting to focus public attention on science, it needs further financial support.

“Probably the chief reason for the Institute's failure to appeal to the public lies in its peculiar constitution. Like the University of New Zealand, it is a central body, governed by representatives elected by constituent local bodies and by Government nominees, and to its ordinary members it is little more than a name. The Board of Governors meets only once a year for the transaction of business, and the Institute as an Institute holds no public meetings. Its main business is to publish its annual volume of *Transactions*, in which nearly all its statutory grant is used. The peculiar position exists that the constituent local bodies have given no financial support to the central body, but are in reality a source of financial weakness to it. Membership of a local society constitutes membership of the Institute, and entitles the member to a copy of the *Transactions*. Consequently any increase in the membership of the Institute has meant a weakening of its finances. It is becoming, of course, increasingly difficult for any scientific society to retain its hold of the popular interest, for science is fast resolving itself into a number of specialised branches of inquiry in each of which a technical nomenclature is found necessary. When scientific men can hardly follow one another's researches, it is useless to hope the public to be interested. A go-between becomes necessary, a man who can follow the progress of research in certain fields, and can present its main results in an interesting form. It is open to question, therefore, whether the large circulation of the *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute* is a desirable policy. The majority of the members would be much better served by the issue of a popular scientific magazine, such as the proposed *Journal of Science and Industry*, provided that the *Transactions* could be readily consulted in all the main public libraries.

“In its relation to research in New Zealand the New Zealand Institute holds a position analogous to that of the Royal Society in Great Britain but without the exclusiveness of membership which so much enhances the reputation of the latter society. In its relation to the public, the New Zealand Institute should, but does not, hold a position analogous to that of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the body which most keeps the public in touch with science, and

from which most of the improvements in the state attitude to science have had their origin. The Australasian Institute for the Advancement of Science meets too seldom in New Zealand to be effective in this direction.

“A thorough-going reform of its constitution is necessary if the New Zealand Institute is to take its proper place in this crisis in the relations between science and national life. The following recommendations are made:

“The Institute should be formed, not of a Board of Governors, and a number of incorporated societies, but of a body of fellows chosen from the most competent scientific men of the Dominion. These fellows should elect an executive committee, which may or may not retain the name of ‘Board of Governors’. They should frame their own rules of entrance, fix their annual subscription and decide for themselves whether or not their numbers be restricted by definite rules. The Institute should, if possible, retain the local societies as affiliated institutions, and admit their members as members of the Institute (but not *ipso facto* as fellows), with the proviso that the *Transactions* of the Institute should only be given to fellows and not to members. The privileges of affiliation would be the opportunity for publication in the *Transactions* of papers read before the affiliated societies, and the existing rights in the library of the New Zealand Institute. The Institute should be required to hold not less than six public meetings during the year, and in order to permit of a proper representation from all parts of the Dominion, an increased grant should be given. For immediate requirements, a Government grant of £1,000 would be sufficient. Nearly £750 of this amount would go in the publication of researches, and the remaining £250 would provide the expenses of the popular meetings, and perhaps leave a little over for the institution of a system of grants. In order to bring such a reform about, in the Amendment of the Act it would be necessary to name some categories of persons to form the nucleus of the fellows. The surviving original members of the Institute, all past and present officers, and present members of the Board of Governors may be suggested as a basis.

“If such a scheme of reform were carried out, the Institute would be able to obtain many more exchanges for the *Transactions* and yet reduce the total number printed, and so improve the financial position. The provision of an increased grant for publication would permit the issue of the *Transactions* in half-yearly parts, and this would greatly hasten the publication of research and at the same time quicken the rate of solution of controversial problems. If the numbers of fellows were restricted fellowship would become an honourable distinction, and the standing and influence of the Institute would be greatly strengthened. The statutory obligation to hold not less than six public meetings in the year, and the provision of extra funds to meet the cost of these meetings would probably lead to the holding of a week of meetings annually in one of the principal towns of the Dominion, where a programme similar to that of the British Association would be carried out, and the public attention would be strongly drawn to the progress of science. In addition other meetings would no doubt be held when opportunity offered. For instance, on the occasion of the meetings of the Senate of the University of New Zealand, or any similar occasion when prominent fellows were brought together. Fellows would be able to voice their views at business meetings of the Institute which would be to them much more than a name.

“The local societies would lose only the inducement they are able to hold out to members in the shape of the annual volume of the *Transactions*, but they would gain by a greater freedom of internal government, and the formation of local societies in the smaller towns would be stimulated. If the local societies substituted for the *Transactions* a copy of a popular science Journal, they would probably easily retain their hold of their members and at the same time largely increase their numbers by the more general interest thus created.

"Some such scheme of reform as that here advocated is essential if the scientific societies of the Dominion are to take a worthy part in the renaissance of social, economic and intellectual thought that has been brought about by the war."

#### COMMENT

Thomson's proposals led to the establishment of a Fellowship in 1919, though not immediately in the way he suggested; not until 1965 was the executive appointed by the Fellows. His view of the Institute as aiming to serve two functions—the "academy" function and the "advancement of science" function—has been endorsed in recent years. The original version apparently proposed that members of affiliated institutions be henceforth known as "associates" and it seems possible Thomson modified this so as to retain them as members after realising the strong opposition of the incorporated societies to his original proposal. The *Transactions* have never been denied to members, but their issue became subject to a financial contribution (levy). The proposal for public meetings was not pursued, apart from the triennial New Zealand Science Congresses, which began in 1919 and have fulfilled an "advancement of science" function. The *Transactions* were first published in parts, not half-yearly but quarterly, in 1927.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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