"Scientific Sydney" — Introduction

As we approach the celebrations of the Bicentennial Year, few subjects can be at once so highly important, yet least understood, than the history of Australian science. A country which depends on so many ways upon the application of knowledge has, in the sciences, an enviable heritage. That heritage, the cultural legacy of our colonial past, is significant to both our sense of nationhood and our spirit of internationalism. Today, scholars are acquiring the materials that will give us a firmer grasp of those factors which directed the pursuit of knowledge in the early years of the settler colony, and which have ever since shaped the character of our scientific enterprise.

In this task, co-operation between historians and scientists is essential. Technical expertise must be matched by historical perspective; institutional folklore must be placed in broader context; biographical anecdote must be sifted and weighed against comparative records. "Metropolitan" zeal for laboratory research must be juxtaposed against field traditions, and the image of science as a metaphor of reason and enlightenment must be qualified by its use as a "tool of empire". Above all, the economic and intrinsically political character of science in a new land of settlement must be understood. Science, like architecture, has shaped our lives, and we must now look more closely at its fine structure.

Rising to this challenge, the Council of the Royal Society of New South Wales, in collaboration with the Royal Australian Historical Society, agreed in 1984 to hold at "History House" a series of exploratory workshops devoted to the historical reconstruction of "Scientific Sydney". This series began in November, 1984, with a day devoted to "Artisans and Managers: Technical Education in New South Wales, 1884-1984". In the event, this occasion celebrated the centennial of the Sydney Technical College, and the sesquicentennial of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts. Both these institutions cooperated fully, as did the Technical and Further Education Department of New South Wales which is soon to constitute its own museum in the city.

This first meeting, to which seven papers were delivered, was so well received, that it was followed in May 1985, by a day devoted to "Culture and Learning in the Colonial Metropolis". This second meeting heard five papers, of which three are presented in the following pages. Abstracts of all papers of both meetings are included as Appendices to this note.

In November, 1985, our third and, arguably, our most successful workshop to date was held to commemorate the centenary of Professor John Smith, foundation Professor of Chemistry and Experimental Philosophy at the University of Sydney. The papers from that session, as edited by myself, will be the basis of the next issue of the Journal and Proceedings.

To the Royal Australian Historical Society, go our warm thanks for their hospitality and enthusiasm. To Ms Christa Ludlow, go the thanks of all concerned with the series' organisation. And to the Royal Society of New South Wales, which enjoys a premier place in the history of science in this country, goes the appreciation of all who rejoice to see the treasures of "Scientific Sydney" thus re-discovered and made public.

Roy M. Macleod,
Dept. of History, University of Sydney, N.S.W., 2006.
Beneficent Providence and the Quest for Harmony: The Cultural Setting for Colonial Science in Sydney, 1850-1890

Gregory Melleuish

The true notion of Providence is, that it uses moral beings, everywhere throughout its immeasurable realms, as its own instruments for the completion of its grand designs in ultimate futurity, without rendering those beings the less moral and accountable. And it is but consistent with the notion of a Providence so perfect and so absolute, that its designs should be at once beneficent and just. And thence must be inferred, in the words of Pope, considering everything in the light of an instrumentality in a supreme hand, that “whatever is, is best”, yet so as that it shall not be best for the perpetrator, and within the contracted circle of his immediate connections, unless it be morally good and right.1

The sentences quoted above come from an editorial of the Empire newspaper published in 1855 and entitled “How the World is Really Governed”. This article (and it was not unusual for that time as clergymen were newspaper editors or leader writers) was a form of “secular sermon” preached at the readers, but it also provides a fair summary of the fundamental values and beliefs prevailing among the articulate and the educated in Sydney during the middle years of the nineteenth century.

It was these men who were actively involved in giving lectures at the Sydney School of Arts, the Philosophical Society and later the Royal Society of New South Wales, who contributed articles and letters to the newspapers and journals of Sydney both on questions of immediate concern and matters of general interest, who created the “intellectual climate” of Sydney during this period. They were clergymen, lawyers, professional men – invariably good, solid respectable members of the community. What the inarticulate, the labourers, farm workers and the like thought on such matters we will never know for such people rarely leave behind a record of their opinions - although the writings of the poet Charles Harpur, who was very much a man of the people, indicate that he shared many of the values of his more middle class compatriots. In any case it was these active, articulate members of the middle class who, through their speeches and writings, set the agenda for the way in which political, social, moral and even scientific issues were discussed during these years. When we speak of colonial culture, it is largely the culture of these men to which we are referring; but I believe it is fair to say that an accurate picture of their “mental furniture” can be extracted from their writings, a picture which provides us with a fairly good idea of the place of science in the culture of colonial Sydney.

It is a truism to say that what we call science or scientific activity does not operate in a vacuum but is part of the more general complex of values operating in a society. If possible, this was even more the case in the nineteenth century. Ours is the age of specialization and of the professional scholar – this is the case in the humanities as much as in the sciences. But there were virtually no professional scientists in mid nineteenth century Sydney, only people interested in “natural philosophy”, enthusiasts rather than people seeking to climb “the greasy pole” of academic life. Such people had no vested interest in becoming “experts”; indeed there was a suspicion of specialization. This was a time when the interconnectedness of all knowledge was emphasized, a belief expressed by John Woolley, first Principal of Sydney University, when he described the way in which Niebuhr, the philologist, had been forced to pursue his studies into philosophy, ethnography, social science and medicine.2

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