

Presidential address at the Gala Dinner

Susan M Pond AM FRSN FTSE FAHMS

President of the Royal Society of New South Wales

Email: president@royalsoc.org.au

Abstract

Address by President Susan M Pond at the Royal Society of New South Wales Gala Dinner Celebrating 200 Years, in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney, 24 June 2022.

It is my privilege to address you tonight as President of the Royal Society of NSW. Celebrating a two-hundred-year milestone pales into insignificance compared to the long history of Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Thank you, Aunty Ann,¹ for your warm welcome to Country.

Former Presidents, Current Council Members, Distinguished Fellows, Fellows and Members of the Society and your guests. Leaders in academia, government, business, and the not-for-profit sector. Andrew and Paula Liveris, who are not here tonight, but are kind sponsors of this dinner and here in spirit. My thanks to the University of Sydney for its generous support of this evening's celebrations, and to the hosts and guests, including students, at the tables graciously sponsored by eight of our State's Universities.

Members of the Society's dedicated Dinner Committee — Bruce Ramage, Wendy Enevoldsen Marian Kernahan, John Hardie, and designer, Virginia Buckingham — made every aspect, every last detail of this evening perfect: guest speaker, Dr Alan Finkel AC.

Tonight, we celebrate the Society's 200th birthday, one year late because of the pandemic.

No Society can boast such a long history unless it has deep connection with its members and the community, unless its values and work resonate deeply with what it means to be human, what it means to experience the magnificent wonder of being alive, what it means to explore all corners of knowledge and humanity with wide-eyed curiosity, what it means to meet extraordinary people who are unlocking the secrets of the world around us, and ourselves, and who are unlocking the potential of our own state and country. The Society summarises these 200-year-old attributes in the short phrase — *Enriching Lives through Knowledge and Inquiry*.

The names of the Society's founders from 200 years ago are still familiar. Brisbane, Barron Field, Goulburn, Wollstonecraft, Oxley, Berry to name a few. Their intent was to establish a Society with a view to inquiring into the various branches of physical science of this vast continent and its adjacent regions.

¹ The dinner was welcomed to country by Wiradjuri elder, Aunty Ann Weldon, founding member of the NSW Aboriginal Children's Service, first female CEO of the Aboriginal Legal Service, and first CEO of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council.

Almost without exception these founding members were pastoralists, merchants, or professionals such as clergymen, lawyers, or medical practitioners. From the beginning, they also recognised the need to educate and inform the broader public about the achievements of science and organised regular gatherings for that purpose.

In 1866, when Queen Victoria granted Royal Assent to the Society, it was renamed The Royal Society of New South Wales. In 1881, the Society was incorporated by an Act of the New South Wales Parliament. The Act, which remains unchanged today, speaks to the broad purpose of the Society “the encouragement of studies and investigations in Science, Art, Literature and Philosophy.”

The Society’s Seal that you see in the booklet on your table was designed by Archibald Liversidge, who at the time of incorporation was Honorary Secretary of the Society. In Liversidge’s words² “Most of the charges in the Seal have a double significance — they each represent one of the sections of the Society and have a symbolic meaning as well.” Each section catered for a specialist interest, such as astronomy, geology, and literature and fine arts. I will leave it to you to examine the Seal more closely. Liversidge was Professor of Chemistry at the University of Sydney from 1874 to 1907, and the first Dean of Science at the University. His portrait hangs here in the Great Hall as do the portraits of several other past and present members of the Society.

As you read in your invitation to attend this dinner, while we are honouring the Society’s past, we are looking to its future. It is my role to provide the yin — the story of our past — to our speaker Alan Finkel’s

yang, the yet to be written story. More about Alan later.

But attempting a history of the Society’s 200-years in a few minutes is impossible. I choose instead to focus on the first 30 years of the Society’s second century, from 1921, to parallel Alan’s lift off in 2021.

1921 is apropos for several reasons. Qantas Ltd was founded in Winton, Queensland, in November 1920. Lawrence Hargrave, a gifted explorer, astronomer, and inventor was a longstanding member of the Society from for 38 years until his death in 1915. His important experiments with box kites proved basic theories of flight. He contributed 24 papers on his aeronautical work on airframes and engines to the Society’s *Journal*. Your program contains an image of Hargrave and his flying machines in action. The Society holds several of his drawings in its collection.

1921 also has the parallel of being towards the end of the influenza pandemic which still stands as one of the greatest natural disasters of all time. The pandemic led to major demographic and social tragedy that compounded the disastrous consequences of World War I. It brought to the fore the same challenges to our health system and the same tensions in the Federation that we have just experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic. Thereafter, Australia lived through the Great Depression triggered by the October 1929 Wall-street stock-market crash.

Other notable events in this thirty-year timeline were: Douglas Mawson’s Antarctic Expeditions (Mawson was awarded the Society’s Clarke Medal in 1936); construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge — the design of which owes so much to Society

² https://royalsoc.org.au/images/pdf/RSNSW_Seal_History.pdf

Member John Bradfield; the Snowy Mountains Scheme; the introduction of the Salk vaccine for influenza; penicillin being made medically useful by Florey and Chain; World War II; and the beginning of the post-war baby boom and post-war immigration.

What a tumultuous thirty years! Alan, you have quite a challenge ahead of you to predict the next thirty!

How did the Society fare during this tumult and what influence did it have? I will recount just a few highlights.

In his Presidential Address³ in 1921, James Nangle, architect and educationalist, wrote “Events arising out of the great war altered the aspect of many things, but perhaps most of all that of science organisations. It became apparent as the war went on that the very existence of nationhood depended on the efficiency with which scientific research was fostered and cared for.”

Such sentiments had led to the Paris Peace Conference, which held formal meetings of the victorious allies in 1919 and 1920. Its aims were to establish the International Research Council, and for each participating country to establish a national one.

The Royal Society of NSW, as the senior scientific society in the country, was invited to convene the Australian conference and form a provisional Australian National Research Council (ANRC), which it did. When the ANRC was established formally in January 1921, it consisted of 100 members representing 22 branches of science. Many members of the Society were chosen as representatives. The ANRC was only dis-

banded in 1954 when it transformed into the Australian Academy of Science. Similarly, through the thinking and advocacy of its members, the Society contributed to the establishment in 1926 of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (now CSIRO).

The 28 September 1927 minutes of the Society’s Council meeting quote a letter from the acting undersecretary of the NSW Premier’s Department “Following upon the representations made by you on behalf of various scientific societies, I have to inform you that the Premier has approved of a block of land situated at the corner of Gloucester and Essex in the Observatory Hill area being made available for the erection of a building to house the Royal Society of NSW, the Institution of Engineers, the Linnean Society, the Australian Chemical Institute, the Wireless Institute, the British Astronomical Association, the Australian Association for the Advancement of Sciences and other similar societies.”

Thus, was born Science House, which three Societies, the Royal Society of NSW, the Linnean Society, and the Institution of Engineers, built at their own expense. This collaboration shows the deep immersion of the Society in the development of NSW and Australia.

On 6 May 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, Professor Vonwiller reported in his Presidential address⁴ that “It is fitting that I should commence my address by noting that it is the first meeting of the Society in its new home, Science House.”

³ James Nangle, Presidential address. The Repatriation Department’s Vocational Training System for returned soldiers., *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 55: 1–48, 1921. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41519222#page/35/mode/tup>

⁴ Oscar Ulrich Vonwiller, Presidential address. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 65: 1–36, 1931. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/46190173#page/35/mode/tup>

The Society occupied Science House until the NSW Government, in its ambition to redevelop the Rocks, gave notice in 1970 of its intention to demolish the building.

The good news is that Science House still stands in all its glory thanks to the intervention of Jack Munday and others to save the Rocks. The bad news is that our Society has led a nomadic existence ever since. Something that we are working to rectify.

On 26 June 1935, Council Minutes recorded, without any previous reference to the matter, that the Society had received a letter from Messrs Allen, Allen & Hemsley, stating that in their opinion there was nothing in the rules to prevent women from becoming members. Eleven women were admitted at the next two General Meetings, clearly because of pent-up demand.

When Arthur Penfold delivered his Presidential address⁵ on 6 May 1936, he said, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first time in the history of the Society that the Presidential address has been delivered to ladies as well as gentlemen.” Palaeontologist Dr Ida Brown, admitted in the first cohort, became the first woman to be elected President of the Society in 1954.

In enabling women to become members, the Society was ahead of its time. Older organisations were slower. The Royal Society of London did not elect its first women until 1945. The Royal Society of Edinburgh reached this milestone in 1949. The 279-year-

old American Philosophical Society elected its first female president, Linda Greenhouse, in 2016. You will see a birthday message from Linda in the booklet on your table.

Speaking of which, I hope you all had the opportunity to read some of the birthday wishes the Society has received from kindred organisations and individuals. They were on display in the Chau Chak Wing Museum earlier tonight, and we will also make them available later. We were delighted to receive so many. I only single out one, from Sir David Attenborough, and I quote “May I send my warmest congratulations to the Royal Society of New South Wales on reaching the two hundredth anniversary of its foundation. No learned society in the world can ever have had the sudden privilege and responsibility of describing and investigating a whole new division of the plant and animal world; and none in my experience has been more generous in guiding visitors from overseas around the marvels of the continent about which it has become so authoritative.”

In 1940, in the shadow of WWII, Halcro Wardlaw noted in his Presidential address⁶ that because of the “uncertainty in world conditions” the Society had written to the Government offering its services and noting that several of its members were already being consulted individually to assist Government Departments.

5 Arthur de Ramon Penfold, Presidential address. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 70: 1–38, 1936. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/46153973#page/39/mode/iup>

6 Henry Sloane Halcro Wardlaw, Presidential address. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 74: 1–41, 1940. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/46186648#page/19/mode/iup>

The 1946⁷ and 1947⁸ Presidential addresses, largely devoted to the consequences of the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan, led to a more intense drive to enlist into Society membership citizens who were not scientists but who embraced wider societal and ethical concerns. The Society's current membership reflects this broader sweep of interests and experiences. We are all the richer for it.

As we dine tonight, we can find many recent parallels with the times in 1921. Not the least of them are the COVID-19 pandemic, tumultuous politics abroad and here in Australia, and fundamental challenges such as climate change and social inequalities. We look forward to the Society playing its part in addressing these challenges. It is in the unique position of possessing enormous intellect and presenting fact-based views across a broad range of topics. I look forward to receiving advice from you about the Society's future direction.

We all look forward to hearing from our after-dinner speaker, Dr Alan Finkel, AC, who will begin that conversation. Alan is a neuroscientist, engineer, and entrepreneur. As Australia's Chief Scientist from 2016 to 2020, Alan led the National Electricity Market Review, the development of the National Hydrogen Strategy, and the panel that advised the Australian Government on the 2020 Low Emissions Technology Roadmap.

Currently Alan is Chair of Stile Education and the Australian Government's Technology Investment Advisory Council. He is also Special Adviser to the Australian Government on Low Emissions Technologies.

Alan, thank you so much for celebrating the Society's 200 years with us. We will be slightly heavier when we board your flight to the future after the main course.



7 Adolph Bolliger, Presidential address. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 80: 1–13, 1946. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/46153368#page/285/mode/tup>

8 Francis Lions, Presidential address. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 81: 1–11, 1947. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/46175755#page/31/mode/tup>