

The Society's NEXUS Exhibition, 2021–2022

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Introduction¹

The Royal Society celebrated the 200th anniversary of its foundation from July 2021 to June 2022. One of the major events the Society held during this period was its Bicentennial exhibition, NEXUS, designed to highlight the Society's achievements and its contributions to the development of NSW and Australia over the 200-year period. NEXUS was held in the Jean Garling Room of the State Library of NSW (where some of the Society's library collection is housed) from 8 November 2021 to 30 June 2022.

This significant exhibition aimed to highlight and display some of the Society's important archives, most of which are held in the State Library, the obvious choice as the location for the exhibition. Planning for the exhibition determined that it should not only tell the story of the Society's origins and progressive development through its various iterations, but also showcase some of its current and past membership and their influences on intellectual thought and practice nationally and globally. It would be the first time since the 1920s that any of the Society's archives had been on display to the public. It would also provide an opportunity to highlight the "services" of the Society: its library, events, community, awards and publications.

The State Librarian, Dr John Vallance, challenged us to ensure that the exhibition

answered his question of "so what?" in relation to the Society. The construct of dividing the exhibition up into the themes of *Origins*, *Ideas*, *Advances* and *Impacts* was developed in direct response to this.

Because of COVID-19, the exhibition was unable to open when originally planned on 26 June 2021; the State Librarian generously provided two extensions to the duration of the exhibition, first to 31 March 2022 and then to 30 June 2022 from its revised starting date of 8 November 2021.

Exhibition content

The title *NEXUS* was chosen for the exhibition as the following two definitions of the word apply equally to the Society:

- a connection or series of connections linking two or more things
- a central or focal point.

A matrix was created to ensure that the various characteristics of the Society were incorporated into the exhibition in some way (e.g. women, youth, literature, art, science, philosophy, branches, high flyers, Distinguished Fellows etc). We associated three major influencers in the history of the Society with each of the four themes of the exhibition: *Origins*, *Ideas*, *Advances* and *Impacts*. These were:

- *Origins*: Alexander Berry (1781–1873), Sir Thomas Brisbane (1773–1860) and Dr Henry Grattan Douglass (1790–1865)

¹ This short summary relies on a piece by John Hardie and Wendy Enevoldsen, published in the November/December 2022 issue of the *Bulletin* of the Royal Society.

- *Ideas*: Joseph Maiden (1859–1925), Thomas Keneally (b 1935) and Baron Robert May of Oxford (1936–2020)
- *Advances*: Ida Browne (1900–1976), Sir Ernest Fisk (1886–1965) and Professor Michelle Simmons (b 1967)
- *Impacts*: Professor Elizabeth Blackburn (b 1948), Professor Thomas Maschmeyer (b 1966) and Professor Brian Schmidt (b 1967).

Each of these members had his or her major area of expertise shown below their image on the wall. We used images which showed the context in which each worked. Where we showcased a living person in the exhibition, we provided them with the opportunity to review what we had written about them.

Beside the four themes were displayed short quotes pertinent to the aims of the Society from four of its Distinguished Fellows: Professors Peter Baume, Jill Trehwella, Barry Jones and Kurt Lambeck. A background video was shown in a continuous loop during exhibition opening hours. It contained an introduction to the exhibition by the President and the reflections on the Society by a selection of Past Presidents. The timeline, some past-presidential biographies and some images from NEXUS were repurposed for the Society's Bicentennial gala dinner on 24 June 2022.

Objects

Conservation requirements meant that we were unable to utilise several Society objects, for example, the Society's Letter Book containing hand-written correspondence with the Society from eminent scientists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the Society's own copy of the 1821 Kamay commemorative plaque. The National Trust's

exhibition "Inquiring Minds," showing in part at the same time as NEXUS, had on display the minute book of the Philosophical Society of Australasia, which meant it was unavailable for NEXUS.

The State Library ensured that the Society's painting of the Rev. W. B. Clarke by Giulio Anivitti (1876), stored in the State Library, was fit for display. It also framed one of its copies of the Kamay commemorative plaque issued by the Philosophical Society of Australasia in 1821 so that it could be displayed in the exhibition. The plaque label was particularly challenging to write, needing to balance the context of the historical event with current perceptions.

The Society was able to provide eight items from its offsite collections for inclusion in the exhibition, one of which, an Australian \$20 banknote (now out of circulation) containing an image of Lawrence Hargrave, was kindly lent by an affiliate of the Society. Other items included the President's Chair from Science House, the restoration of which several Past Presidents had generously contributed to, as well as two debossing tools used in the bookbinding of the Society's book collection. All other items were selected from the Society's archives housed in the State Library, as well as a small number kindly lent by the Library itself.

Emeritus Professor Lindsay Botten produced the Past Presidents' video. The original intention was for the video to include a range of material — scholarship winners, forums etc., but we didn't have sufficient time to achieve this. The Society's Librarian made contact with as many Past Presidents as he could locate and organised for them to be filmed in the Jean Garling Room to offer their observations about the Society during

their association with it. He provided three questions to them in advance so that they could prepare for the interview. Only the responses to the first question were included in the final video.

Sponsorships

The Presidents' Chair displayed in the exhibition was restored prior to its relocation to the State Library for the exhibition. This work was generously supported by financial contributions from the following Past Presidents: Ragbir Bhathal, the late David Branagan, the late Edric Chaffer, Trevor Cole, George Gibbons, John Hardie, Donald Hector, Brynn Hibbert, Karina Kelly, Donald Napper, Ian Sloan, and Bruce Warren. A brass plaque recording their contributions is being created for affixing to the chair. A discount was provided by FX framing for the restoration and reframing of the original watercolour of the Society's seal by Archibald Liversidge (1881).

Launch

The exhibition was originally due to be launched at the State Library on Friday 25 June 2021 and to be open to the public the following day. But owing to uncertainties about COVID lockdowns, this was postponed. Indeed, the State government imposed public health restrictions for the Greater Sydney region on that day. This was very disappointing but the Library let the exhibition be moth-balled until it could be opened later in the year. With the easing of restrictions in the latter part of 2021, a new launch occurred on 10 December. The State Librarian was asked to open the exhibition owing to his personal support for it.

Visitors and opening hours

The total number of visitors to the exhibition was 971. This comprised a mixture of Society members and the general public, as well as those visiting as part of special private tours. A Visitors' Book was on display which allowed visitors to comment on the exhibition. The comments were invariably positive.

The Jean Garling Room is not usually open to the public and has been set up primarily as a venue for meetings of the Library Council and the Library Foundation, with a bespoke board table in the centre of the room, and not as an exhibition space. This did not appear to hamper the enjoyment by visitors of the exhibition.

NEXUS was open on Mondays 2–5 PM, Thursdays 3–7 PM and Sundays 2–5 PM. These opening times were in part dictated by the State Library's opening hours.

NEXUS objects into the Society's Archive

A one-off print of the NEXUS title was commissioned to commemorate the bicentenary and to add something tangible that was exhibition-related to the Society's archive. The renovated Presidential Chair, table runner, foyer sign and acrylic labels will also be entered into the Society's archive along with the NEXUS visitors' book, postcard, booklet and launch gift pack example.

Benefits

The exhibition provided these benefits to the Society: increased awareness among the general public of the existence of the Society and how it has benefited NSW; alerting our members to the rich history of the Society and its contributions; and creating a deeper,

more productive relationship with the State Library of NSW.

Conclusion

The NEXUS exhibition achieved its aims of appropriately celebrating the 200 years of

the Society and its antecedents, bringing the Society to the attention of the general public in a novel way, generating a greater understanding among members of the richness of their Society and utilising the Society's valuable archives for its practical benefit.

