

# HISTORY HOUSE

## *THE WOMEN'S AUXILIARY AND ITS SUCCESSORS*

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**I**N 1911 the Australian Historical Society changed its rules to allow women to be admitted to Council, one motivation perhaps being to 'broaden its franchise', as early Annual Reports repeatedly referred to the need to increase membership. The first two female councillors of the Society were Mrs A. G. (Ethel) Foster and Miss Margaret Windeyer who were elected in 1912 and 1913 respectively.

The first mention of a 'Women's Auxiliary Committee' occurs in the Annual Report for 1927 under the heading 'The Building Fund and the Women's Auxiliary Committee'. The Society had long been proposing permanent premises, and the Women's Auxiliary was a consequence. The final paragraph of the one-page item opened 'To further the home building fund cause, several of the ladies of the Society have formed a Women's Auxiliary Home Building Fund Committee. Mrs A. G. Foster has been elected President, Miss Hume Barbour and Mrs W. Welch Vice-Presidents, Mrs Aubrey Halloran Treasurer, and Miss Jessie Ferguson Honorary Secretary pro tem.' Every lady member of the Society was invited to connect herself with this committee. The early years of the Auxiliary are inseparably linked to the question of the Society's obtaining its own premises. The Auxiliary, as it proved, could almost have been called 'the Foster Committee'.

The desire for premises had been first expressed as early as the 1909 Annual Report, which stated 'It became apparent early in the year that an office in which to transact the Society's business and in which to keep its property, was an absolute necessity. A room for this purpose was rented in Norwich Chambers.'

In the 1915 Annual Report, a section headed 'Deputations' reports on an appeal to the Director of Education 'relative to an office for the Society'. The outcome was satisfactory, a room being provided in the building 'recently vacated by the Department of Education', and the meeting room in the new building of that Department was also made available for the Society's monthly meetings. The item continues: 'We look forward to the day when the office will have developed into a well-furnished Historical Museum and Club Room, in which members will meet habitually to examine exhibits of historical interest

and engage in social and historical intercourse.' The Historical Museum was to become a recurring theme, not resolved for over sixty years when the Society handed over the bulk of its collection to the Powerhouse Museum in 1979.

The Annual Report of 1921, under the heading 'The Future of the Society', first talks about the Society owning its own premises. A special Council committee, set up in response to a suggestion by William Tench that year, recommended that:

- (a) An appeal be launched amongst the members of the Society and the general public for a fund to be devoted to purchasing suitable premises as a permanent house for the Society;
- (b) That the Government be approached and requested to subscribe £ for £ for any money raised under the scheme; and
- (c) That the present life members' fund be converted into a building fund as a nucleus of such a fund.

The Council noted that only one or two other comparable societies in the 'Old World' were larger than the RAHS, that until the RAHS possessed a home of its own it would be unstable, and that the necessity for providing room for the establishment of an historical museum emphasised the need for such a home. The fundraising scheme for 'erecting an Australian home for Clio, the Muse of History', was duly launched at that meeting. An 'Appeal for Funds' for 'A Home for the Historical Society' was announced in the Annual Report for 1922, in which it was noted that wealthier American societies had commodious buildings of their own, and that when a suitable building had been procured, a tablet would be erected in a conspicuous place recording the names of all contributors of £1,000 or more. The Annual Report for 1923 reported that 'the Building Fund now stands at £1,250'. Appendix I of the 1923 Report, headed as in the previous year, spelt out the envisaged accommodation as 'a Lecture Hall capable of holding three or four hundred people, a large room to be utilised as an Historical Museum, and other Committee, Library, Reading and Club Rooms'. At least £30,000 was envisaged as being 'required to allow of suitable premises to be acquired in a convenient situation in the city'. In 1925 the Building Fund, after a benefaction of around £4,000 from Mrs A. G. Foster, stood at £6,468.

The Auxiliary was not just a fundraising group. The 1934 Report acknowledged that the Ladies Auxiliary had 'the double advantage of bringing together the women members in closer social union and of increasing the Building Fund of the Society'. Nevertheless, money was of pressing importance. By 1935 the matter of accommodation was becoming dire, the room allocated in the Education Department Building having become so overcrowded that the Society found it almost impossible to accept more donations of historical artifacts. The hope was that the Government, already assisting the Society financially through an annual subsidy as well as through legislation advancing some of its initiatives, would provide a suite of rooms. The Society required 'at least an exhibition room, a Secretary's room, a Committee-room, and a lumber room for unpacking and preparing exhibits'. The Annual Report continued 'The establishment of an Historical Museum ... should have been an



The Foster Room in 'History House', 8 Young Street, Sydney.



Excursion to Camp Cove in 1934. Mrs Foster is seated first right from centre.



accomplished fact many years ago'. Meanwhile, the Women's Auxiliary kept toiling away, their total contributions towards the building reaching \$600 that year. In an attempt to stimulate gifts, the Society printed a donations and bequests form for the first time at the front of the Annual Report.

The Annual Report for 1940 reported that the Society at long last had a home of its own, 'an epoch in its history'. This was at No 8 Young Street, Sydney, acquired for £12,200, with alterations carried out for an additional £2,522. The RAHS moved into its new quarters at the beginning of 1941, the building being officially declared open by Professor S. H. Roberts, Challis Professor of History in The University of Sydney, on Friday 7 February 1941.

Of the £800 raised in 1940 by the Women's Auxiliary £600 was used for the purchase of furniture, carpets and cushions for the Foster Room (named after Ethel Foster) in the new 'History House'. China, cutlery and linen had already been paid for, whilst 'the ladies have also defrayed the cost of fitting out a servery replete with all modern conveniences. The Auxiliary have done this with a view to light luncheons and afternoon teas being served to members at a reasonable charge.'

The Auxiliary's president was still Mrs Foster, the vice-presidents being Mrs W. Welch—also part of the foundation committee—together with Mrs N. J. Dunlop, Mrs O. Saunders and Mrs J. A. Shaw. The honorary secretary was Mrs W. Bruce-Clarke and honorary treasurer Mrs W. J. Dellow. The item in the Report concluded 'It is especially gratifying to members of the Auxiliary that after thirteen years untiring effort they have been able to assist in no small way in the establishment of History House.'

With the Society's acquisition of the new premises, a new phase of the work of the Women's Auxiliary for the Society began, namely the provision of light refreshments at low charge. Mrs F. M. Robjohns was appointed honorary housekeeper for this purpose. Still the fundraising continued, not only for domestic purposes. In 1942, the Women's Auxiliary transferred £32/10/- to the Society's funds, and provided heaters and an umbrella stand and in 1943 it transferred £34/15/- to the Society, as well as donating £8/10/- to the Commonwealth Government for the purchase of aircraft. The following year, it gave £10 to the RAAF on top of £24/19/7 to the Society and in 1945 it gave a further £4/10/3 to the RAAF.

By now the Society was saying that it needed more space, as it was not 'realizing all its objectives, and cannot do so until it enlarges its premises, when it may be possible to establish its long desired historical museum'. Consequently it re-established its Building Fund, determining 'to place therein such proportion of its surpluses as the Council should determine'.

The work continued in the immediate post-War years and sums were raised and transferred to the Society for building extension when needed. The 1947 Report mentioned that 'the usual bridge afternoons have been held on the first Wednesday of each month' and that these 'proved happy reunions as well as a financial success'. There were also other events, at which members acted as hosts. In 1948, an Anniversary Party was held to mark 21 years of the Auxiliary, at which

foundation members Mrs A. G. Foster, still the president, Mrs W. Welch, still a vice-president, and Mrs J. A. Shaw, committee supporter since 1928, attended.

And so the years passed. The 1951 Report spelt out the functions more clearly: 'Members of the Women's Auxiliary have met regularly during the year. Bridge parties have been held in the Foster Room on the first Wednesday of each month. Committee meetings have been held at the home of Mrs Foster, whose attendance at History House has been restricted by ill health. Throughout the year members of the Auxiliary have acted as hostesses at afternoon tea.' The Auxiliary made a donation of £25 to mark the Society's jubilee in addition to the regular annual donations.

The Annual Report for 1954 recorded that Mrs Foster, the founding president since September 1927, benefactor, and Fellow of the Society since 1924, had in March that year finally tendered her resignation from the Women's Auxiliary. Miss Gladys Blacket was elected as her successor.

The Annual Report for 1956 recorded the work of the Women's Auxiliary continuing in the post-Foster era with meetings, functions, fund raising, and hostessing at afternoon teas. Bridge parties, along with the other activities, still continued, stated the 1957 Report, which also announced that Miss Blacket had retired as president, being replaced by Mrs. W. L. (Olive) Havard. On 20 October 1958, the anniversary of Mrs Foster's death, a memorial inscription to her was unveiled in the Foster Room, the work and gift of Mr. A. E. Stephen, a past president of the Society. The Auxiliary in 1958 also established a special section in the library, in response to a suggestion that reading nights or afternoons be established. This was opened in September, with a membership of 58 and gifts of 168 books. Thirty years later the Foster Prize, awarded to the leading student in Australian history at the Higher School Certificate, was named in her honour.

The Auxiliary's entries in the reports of 1957 and 1958 increased to over a page in length, reflecting the vigour and range of its activities. An initiative of 1958 was the establishment of the *Auxiliary Record*, a journal to record addresses given at special meetings, as well as other activities during the year. It seems to have continued for about three years.

Over the next several years the Auxiliary continued with the usual functions and services, including the Library (Special Section), regular events such as monthly bridge parties, additional monthly card parties, anniversary functions and the regular Christmas party. The 1963 Report opens with the statement 'The aim of the Women's Auxiliary is to work for the benefit of the Society and to create an atmosphere of friendliness among the members.'

There was a general change in style to briefer reporting in Annual Reports from 1965, and for the next two decades the entries, once extending well over a page in length, reduced to between 12 and as few as two lines. From these it can be learnt that in 1969, the Women's Auxiliary continued its usual activities under the presidency of Mrs. Olive Havard and held its customary functions, with the lending library well patronised. In 1970, because of the move to new premises at 133 Macquarie Street, the Auxiliary's activities had to be suspended in the later part of the year. A two-line

report in 1971 recorded that both the Woman's Auxiliary and the Social Group had had a successful year after resuming their activities in the new building.

Throughout the 1970s the Women's Auxiliary and the Social Group pursued their wonted course. By 1980, the Annual Report was recording that 'The Auxiliary expanded its traditional role during the year and involved itself in a wide range of talks, social functions and general assistance to the Society. It was the Council's policy to encourage this expansion.' 1981 was 'A year of great activity'.

In 1983, a three-line report stated that 'The former Women's Auxiliary has been renamed the Auxiliary Committee. It has engaged in a variety of activities through which a substantial sum has been raised for the Library'. The significance of this name change was that the Auxiliary had broadened its membership to include men. In 1984, now under the chairmanship of Miss Frances Pollon, the committee arranged a number of meetings, excursions and other activities which were enjoyed by members. As well 'a substantial sum was raised for the library and for other special purposes'.

By 1985, other emerging social trends were being acknowledged for 'In providing daytime activities, the Auxiliary catered most valuably to members unable or unwilling to go to fixtures at night.' This refrain was to be repeated annually over the next four years. The 1985 Report went on to say 'The changing role of the Auxiliary from a women's group to one catering for the entire membership continued to be demonstrated during the year and attendances at activities were so substantial that an extra meeting each month was organised. A number of visitors to Auxiliary activities enrolled as members of the Society'.

In 1986, the Annual Report recorded that under the direction of Miss Pollon, 'the Auxiliary conducted an energetic programme with fortnightly addresses on Wednesday afternoons, several excursions, a special Queen's Birthday afternoon tea, a Market Day in October, and a Christmas party in December. Members raised a substantial amount of money for Society purposes and donated \$2,000 to enable the Society to purchase a larger and more versatile photocopying machine.' The 1987 report stated: 'Members of the Auxiliary, as has become their custom, also raised funds for special purposes. This year these included some restoration work to the square piano in the Drawing Room, kitchen equipment, glass, and a contribution towards new curtains in the auditorium.' The Reports in 1988 recorded that: 'In response to queries about the history of 133 Macquarie Street, funds raised by the Auxiliary were used to print the history of History House by Frances Pollon' and in 1989 that 'Frances Pollon stood down from her position of Convenor in December.' Since 1982, the Auxiliary had raised \$8,485 for the purchase of capital items for the Society.

In 1990 there was no reference at all to the Auxiliary, which appears to have been restyled 'Day Lecture Group' with Maurine Goldston-Morris as Convenor, and Nancy O'Dwyer, Mary St John Henry, June Adams and Clive Trevarton as committee members. 'The Day Lecture Group had a very successful year. It joined forces with the Arthur Phillip Society in preparing an Exhibition of Portuguese



Cartography at History House with 49 maps of the discovery of the New World. We thank the Portuguese Government for allowing this outstanding Exhibition to be on display at History House. The Volunteers' Christmas Party, organised by the Day Lecture Group, hosted representatives from 17 Affiliated Societies. A major fundraising programme has been initiated by the Day Lecture Group to purchase a new photocopier for the Society. During 1990 the members raised over \$1,000 towards the total cost of \$9,500.'

The change was clarified in 1992, along with a sombre announcement that 'After many years the Day Lecture Group (formerly the Women's Auxiliary) has informed Council that it will cease operations. We thank those taking part for their years of dedication and service and hope that an alternative programme of week-day activities can be arranged for members who supported this group. A new group for younger members, the Rum Corps [established by Brian McDonald, councillor] has increased the number of students and young members for the first time in many years.' Elsewhere in the same Report there was more elaboration: 'Originating as the Women's Auxiliary this group has spent many years fundraising on behalf of the Society. However, the pressure of organising many functions has become an onerous one for this small band of volunteers and they have notified their intention to disband at the end of 1992.' Lectures covering a wide range of topics had been held monthly during the year, as usual.

But it was not to be the end after all. The 1993 Annual Report says that the Day Lecture Group was 're-formed in March 1993' with Mrs M. Phillips as Convener and Mr C. Trevarton, Ms J. Woods, Mrs D. Chessell, Mrs B. Naughton as committee members, 'and since June has met on the first Wednesday of each month'. Monthly lectures resumed.

In 1995, in another sign of changing times, Vic Martin took over as the first male convener, succeeded the following year by Clive Trevarton, under whose leadership 'a diverse monthly lecture programme was presented' in the years that followed up to and including 1999.

After more than seventy years of very useful activity the Women's Auxiliary and its successors have proved very hard to kill off.