

This will appear in the next Bulletin - gives a little of the ideas our founder had for the Society

# The Founding Days of our Society: the Guide and his Dreams

Contributed by John Webster, Auckland Founders Society

Imagine if besides operating as the Founders Society throughout country, the society also had charge of Te Papa; the National library; Archives NZ; the NZ Portrait Gallery; the Army Museum, and numerous other large museums in the country, plus political affiliation? No? Well this would have been the case if the original concept behind establishing Founders' had been carried out in its entirety.

It is a historical fact that Douglas Hope Johnston was the person who proposed the formation of the New Zealand Founders Society in 1939. Recognition of his role was maintained for years but has diminished with time.

In the early 1960s, I often heard executive members being asked, "Who was Hope Johnston?" Invariably the answer was, "Oh he was an Australian and we don't know much about him and none of us ever met him." His details had obviously faded from memory, and what a pity, as research I carried out over lockdown presented me with a man who was so overly enthused with the idea, going back over many years, that he could not believe anyone would question him. In 1910 had he established the Australian Pioneer's Club, (it was only for men, a women's only club came later) and the genesis of another in London. The proposition he presented in Wellington, in 1939, was so far-reaching in its aims and objects that most ideals could not be immediately developed, and eventually were never attained then, or since. Documents show that he first considered a New Zealand group as early as 1913 when he approached the New Zealand Agent General in London and the then Prime Minister of New Zealand, without any definite result.

Douglas Hope Johnston, was born in Wellington in 1874, and died in London in 1957. He was a descendant of some 1840 settlers here, while in Australia his forebears were military officers who



had arrived with the First Fleet. His father, Percival, is remembered with a street named for him in Wellington City – Percival Street – as a result of being one of the estate agents who laid out the residential plots and roads in the vicinity. When Douglas was five the family moved to Sydney, later travelling to England and Scotland to further his education. For some time he trained in law, being called to the Bar in London in 1900. In 1901 he returned to Australia, living there for the next 30 years before going back to London. He did marry and was the father of just one child, a daughter. While mixing in business and political circles he first broached his ideas about commemorating the early

settlers to Australia and New Zealand.

In 1938 reports of his arrival in Wellington circulated detailing his career and the mission he was conducting for marking the early settler communities in Britain and Australia. The first long report appeared in the *Evening Post* in October, 1938, followed by a much more detailed letter he wrote to the editor on 14 February 1939. Shortly after a news report announced that the inaugural meeting of a society would take place on 1 March 1939.

Johnson in his letter gave points for action that could possibly be achieved. He generalised that the fraternity and goodwill within groups would bring closer contact between the descendants. Unlike his Australian group both male and female members were sought and branches throughout the country were encouraged. Johnston commanded the branches should have, 'a president, a deputy president, 12 vice-presidents and a committee of nine. The president to be a man and two-thirds of the vice-presidents and committee to be men'. The first executive would be composed of thirteen members with two being female.



Membership was available to descendants with forbears who had arrived up to a certain date – in the case of Wellington and Auckland it was up to 1850. Much later the executive shortened this to only those coming in the first ten years of settlement; i.e. 1840-50. This excluded, as it did for years, those that wanted membership. It is only on recent years that the criteria were opened to those 'who arrived during, or before'. The final date was 1850, but, as Johnston pointed out, 'for those who just miss being eligible to form a Pioneers' Society'. This meant that up to 1850 were Founders and those after, to an unknown end date, were Pioneers. He saw the two groups running together, but gives no methods for that achievement. Of course all this never happened.

As, 'the society will be the most exclusive historical organisation in New Zealand' Johnston believed it should advocate for an 'All New Zealand National Day on February 6 as New Zealand Day'. (This is in advance of what actually happened many years later when the society supported the New Zealand idea, when it was debated, and created, only to change later to 'Waitangi Day'.)

The so-called exclusiveness of the society emboldened the suggestion that it found a 'National Historical Museum, by collecting the portraits of founders, historical pictures, prints, books, documents and relics connected with, or relating to the "Founders"'. These aims were not achieved by the society but are now institutions established by various Governments since. It would be of interest to know how Johnston was going to fund these places which were certainly beyond the small subscription rate, and who would take charge of the construction of the necessary buildings. In Australia and England Johnston called for donations from wealthy individuals, families and companies for erecting such places, or leasing them. The one in London was not only a set of offices but displayed outside a large statue of Captain Arthur Philip, partly sponsored by the Australian Government. But did we have enough of these entrepreneurial people in New Zealand at the time for it to succeed?

Another grand scheme was for the Founders to preserve historical places, buildings and monuments, which is now the job of several divisions of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. Again no details about how this could be established, without the necessary finance which would have been hard to come by then, and even now.

Because other suggestions had come to fruition overseas, that he had initiated, Johnston believed New Zealand Founders should obtain, 'a Royal Charter by which its members will become 'Fellows of the Royal New Zealand Founders' – F.R.N.Z.F.S.'

The ninth suggestion made by Hope Johnston was for a badge, without a design suggested. (Many older members will remember the first badges depicted the head of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, surrounded by a ribbon with words upon it, and although there was subsequent alteration to the words it always stated that it had to represent Wakefield.) Can you imagine the size of Founders if these ideas had been created – it sounds like hundreds of people engaged in hundreds of jobs, running departments and buildings, along with all the commercial requirements such as wages and tax? I wonder how he saw the members being able to do all this as it was just a small common interest group surviving on subscription paying members who already had their own employment. Would we have become a rival for the later Fletcher Corporation type empire?

The inaugural meeting took place, presided over by Mr Cheviot Bell, who was elected first President of the Founders. This was a foregone conclusion as Hope-Johnston had said Bell would lead the inaugural meeting long before it took place, so it is obvious he was discussing the idea with sympathetic individuals.

Douglas Hope Johnston's ambitions were greeted with enthusiasm and the inaugural committee set it on course, but between that first meeting and until at least 1947, or so, it was still finding its way. The war years and the planning and setting up of the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington, and the provinces, during 1938-39, caused further delay.

He thought everyone with the right arrival dates could join, but reading the various documents one gets the impression, hopefully wrong, that he saw it with an aristocratic group leading, with members at a certain level below – a class-like situation he had lived with since birth and continued with as a adult, so for him it was normal to follow what he knew. Nevertheless, we must give him due recognition as he was the one with the spirit, the contacts, and a enough arrogance, to light the way for the New Zealand Founders Society to exist for the next 83 years.