

Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows – History

In the Beginning!

While the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation was re-established in its current format in 1953, Australian links to the Foundation were known to exist prior to WWII. For example, one Distinguished Fellow, the late Mary Angela Miller, with the support of an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship, studied at Munich University in the early 1930s, taking courses with Dr. Vossler (Romance Language), Dr. Katcher (Romance Theatre) and Professor Pinder (Romance Art).

The earliest Fellowship known amongst the current Association membership is that awarded to Dr Harold Goodwin in 1967 who conducted research in Chemistry at the University of Munich. Dr Goodwin became lifelong friends with Dr Philipp Gülich (University Mainz) and together they became world authorities in applications of Mössbauer spectroscopy in inorganic chemistry. Harold lost one son, Michael, at an early age to cancer, but was very proud of his other son, Andrew who, at the time of writing, is a Professor of Materials Chemistry at Oxford. There were many other Fellowships awarded to Australian applicants in the years after this, with the result that a Symposium of past von Humboldt Fellows was held in Sydney in 1973 [1]. It was during this Symposium that concern was expressed at the lack of any Australian reciprocity in relation to the valuable research support afforded by the Foundation in Bonn towards visiting Australian Fellows. It was partly this initiative and subsequent encouragement for the formation of regional Associations of Fellows from the Foundation itself, that led to the first steps being taken to form an Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows at a conference held at Melbourne University in 1983.

Ongoing Conferences

The enthusiasm of the founding President, Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger, and his initial committee set the pattern of Biennial Scholarly Symposia of Fellows and subsequent Meetings were as follows:

- 1 University of Melbourne (1985).
- 2 University of Adelaide (1987). “The German Experience of Australia 1833 – 1938” Organising Committee: Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger (Chair) (Flinders University), Dr George Gream (University of Adelaide) and Dr Ian Harmstorf (University of Adelaide)
- 3 Flinders University (1989). Organising Committee: Dr Peter O’Donoghue (Chair), Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger (Flinders University) and Dr George Gream (University of Adelaide).
- 4 University of New South Wales (13th December 1991). Organising Committee: Assoc Professor Harold (Harry) Goodwin (Chair) (UNSW)
- 5 Mannix College, Monash University, (3rd – 5th December, 1993). “The Australian Experience of Germany” Organising Committee: Dr Gabrielle McMullen (Chair), Assoc Professor Trevor Finlayson and Assoc Professor Ian Nicholls (Monash University).
- 6 University of Melbourne (1995). Organising Committee: Dr Harold Graze (Chair), Dr Fred Bull (University of Melbourne) and Dr Helmut Hügel (RMIT University).
- 7 Australian Catholic University (Ballarat) (1997). Organising Committee: Professor Gabrielle McMullen and Dr. Robert Gascoigne (ACU, Ballarat).
- 8 Australian National University (17th – 19th September, 1999). Humboldt Global Colloquium. Organisation: Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Bonn.

- 9 University of New South Wales (7th – 9th December, 2001). Organising Committee: Assoc Professor Roger Read (Chair), Professor David Black, Assoc Professor Harold Goodwin (University of New South Wales).
- 10 University of Auckland, New Zealand (20th – 22nd February, 2004): Organising Committee: Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger (Chair, Physics – University of Auckland)
- 11 University of Queensland, (2nd – 4th September, 2005). Organising Committee: Dr Ralf Dietzgen (Chair) (University of Queensland) and Dr Kathy Andrews (Queensland Institute for Medical Research).
- 12 Australian Catholic University (Melbourne), (7th – 9th September, 2007). “In the Spirit of von Humboldt”. Organising Committee: Professor Gabrielle McMullen (Chair) (ACU), Assoc Professor Trevor Finlayson (University of Melbourne), Dr Gary Bryant (RMIT University) and Assoc Professor Ian Nicholls (Monash University).
- 13 University of Otago, New Zealand, (28th – 30th January, 2010). “In the Spirit of Alexander von Humboldt and Friedrich Wilhelm von Humboldt: The Role of Fundamental Research in our Society”. Organising Committee: Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger (NZ) and Professor Majella Franzmann (University of Otago).
- 14 Neuroscience Research Australia (NeuRA), Sydney, (30th September – 2nd October, 2011). “Preserving the Humboldt Tradition of Scholarship in Australasia”. Organising Committee: Assoc Professor Kay Double (Chair) (NeuRA), Dr Maria Nowotny (University of Western Sydney) and Professor Rob Robson (James Cook University).
- 15 Mercure Hotel, Sydney, (17th – 19th October, 2013). Humboldt Global Colloquium “Looking to the Future: International Research in a Changing World”. Organisation: Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Bonn
- 16 IMAS Centre, University of Tasmania, (20th – 22nd November, 2015). “Global Perspectives, Local Knowledge”. Organising Committee: Dr Peter Jarvis (Chair), Professor Simon Ellingsen, Assoc Professor Michael Gardiner, Dr Nathan Kilah and Professor Jeff Malpas (University of Tasmania).
- 17 Royal Society of New Zealand, Wellington, (17th – 19th November, 2017). “Our Changing World in the South Pacific”. Organising Committee: Professor Eamonn O’Brien (Chair) (University of Auckland), Dr Grant Williams (Victoria University, Wellington), Professor Barry Scott (Massey University), Dr Andrew Matthews (AM-NZ Services), Professor John Hearnshaw (University of Canterbury) and Assoc Professor Trevor Finlayson (University of Melbourne).
- 18 Macquarie University, Sydney, (22nd – 24th November, 2019). “Sharing Knowledge in the Spirit of Humboldt”. Organising Committee: Chair: Professor Ingrid Piller (Macquarie University), Academic Advisory Board: Professor David Black and Assoc Professor Roger Read (UNSW), Professor Michael Gillings, Professor Bronwyn Neal and Professor Lucy Taksa (Macquarie), Professor Eamonn O’Brien (University of Auckland). Organising Committee: Dr. Jinhyun Cho, Dr. Loy Lising, Dr. Shiva Motaghi-Tabari, Dr. Vera Williams Tetteh, Dr. Hanna Torsh and Pia Tendero (Macquarie), Katharina McGrath (DAAD/Macquarie) and Dr. Laura Smith-Khan (University of Technology, Sydney).

The COVID-19 Pandemic interrupted the above biennial sequence of Symposia, such that the next event following the above was postponed in the lead-up to November, 2021, since the majority of Members did not wish to hold an “online A&NZAHF Symposium.” Thus, the 19th Biennial Symposium was held in November, 2022 as follows:

- 19 Deakin University, Geelong, (18th – 20th November, 2022). “Humboldtian Research towards a Sustainable World”. Organising Committee: Chair, Professor Jean du Plessis,

Professor Rosanne Guijt, Assoc Professor Shiri Krebs, Assoc Professor Ross Marceau (all from Deakin University) and Ms Jess Holmes (Senior Event Coordinator, Deakin University). Most of the event was held at the Waterfront Campus of Deakin University but a visit to the Waurin Ponds Campus on the Saturday afternoon included a tour of the Carbon Nexus Building. The event was assisted by a generous *Humboldt Kolleg Grant* from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and Dr Thomas Hesse, Deputy Secretary of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, attended the *Kolleg*. In addition, Dr Hesse made visits to Administrative Staff at the Universities of Melbourne, Monash, RMIT and Deakin during the week prior to the *Kolleg*.

In each case, the organisation of the Meeting has been undertaken by a team of volunteers, for the most part Fellows from the institution mentioned or from neighbouring institutions. Some financial support has often been afforded to attendees by the Association and Fellows have been encouraged to include their post-graduate students in the Meetings where appropriate.

Two particular Biennial Symposia were held under the auspices of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation itself, namely those in 1999 and 2013, and these were conducted under the “International Global Colloquium” program which is a feature of the Foundation’s activities. The Meetings held at venues in New Zealand (2004, 2010 and 2017) were a direct result of the goodwill that has existed between the Australian and New Zealand Associations since their inceptions. It is a matter of odd coincidence that the founding Presidents of both Associations had the name “Peter Schwerdtfeger”, despite the two having no relationship, to the best of the authors’ knowledge.

Following nine of the above Biennial Conferences, a publication, containing some of the papers presented, has been published. These publications are as follows:

- 1987 “The German Experience of Australia” eds. Ian Harmstorf and Peter Schwerdtfeger ISBN 0 9588149 0 2 (Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, 1988) 138 pp.
- 1989 “Proceedings of the Third Biennial Conference” ed. Peter O’ Donoghue (Flinders Press, Adelaide, 1990) 52 pp.
- 1992 "Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Conference of the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows" ed. Peter O'Donoghue (Flinders Press, Adelaide, 1992) 45 pp.
- 1993 “The Australian Experience of Germany” eds. Trevor R. Finlayson and Gabrielle L. McMullen ISBN 0 9588149 1 0 (Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, 1994) 103 pp.
- 2011 “Preserving the Humboldt Tradition of Scholarship in Australasia” ed. Trevor R. Finlayson ISBN 9780958814929 (Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, 2012) 92 pp.
- 2015 “Global Perspectives, Local Knowledge”, *Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania*, Vol. 150, Part 1, eds. M. Davies and T.R. Finlayson ISSN 0080-4703 (The Royal Society of Tasmania, 2016) 60 pp.
- 2017 “Our Changing World in the South Pacific: Australasian and German Perspectives (2018)” ed. Trevor R. Finlayson ISBN: 978-0-9588149-4-2 (Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, 2018) 112 pp.
- 2019 “Sharing Knowledge in the Spirit of Humboldt”, *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, Vol. 152, Part 3, Numbers 475 & 76, pp 291-340 (2020), ed. Robert Marks.
- 2022 “Humboldtian Research towards a Sustainable World”, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, Vol. 135, Parts 1 & 2, pp 1-89 (2023), ed. William Birch.

In addition, as the result of a joint symposium between the Association and The Royal Society of Victoria entitled “Celebration of German Contributions to Australian Science and Victorian Scientific Institutions – Past and Present” (1st – 3rd October, 2014) the following “Humboldt Issue” was published:

Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria, Vol 127, Part 1, June, 2015, eds. William Birch and Mark Williams ISSN 0035-9211 (The Royal Society of Victoria, 2015) 116 pp.

Administrative Structure

The Association has maintained a formal administrative structure, according to a Constitution which was enacted upon establishment. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there have only been very minor modifications to this Constitution since it was promulgated. Administratively, it calls for a Biennial Business Meeting, held in conjunction with the Biennial Conference, at which a National Committee is elected consisting of an Executive (President, Vice-President, Honorary Secretary, Honorary Treasurer) together with nine other members of whom at least one must be from each of the States and Territories of Australia. This National Committee holds office from 1st January of the year following the Meeting until 31st December, two years from that time.

State and Territory representatives from time to time organise local events. A popular and time-honoured event is a dinner held locally and as close as is convenient to 14th September, to “celebrate” Alexander von Humboldt’s birthday. Since 2020 the Association has also held a national online celebration of Humboldt’s birthday with an invited speaker.

The Executive Members since the beginning of the Association have been as follows:

President:

Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger (Flinders University and Airborne Research Australia) (1983 – 2009)

Professor Rob Robson (James Cook University) (2010 – 2012)

Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM (Australian Catholic University) (2012 –)

Vice-President:

Dr. Harold Graze (University of Melbourne) (1983 – 1992)

Professor Rob Robson (James Cook University) (2007 – 2009)

Professor Gabrielle McMullen (Australian Catholic University) (1997 – 2005), (2008 – 2012)

Professor Jeff Malpas (University of Tasmania) (2012 –)

Honorary Secretary:

Dr. Peter O’Donoghue (Flinders University) (1983 – 1998)

Dr Julian Lower (Australian National University) (1999 – 2007)

Associate Professor Trevor Finlayson (University of Melbourne) (2008 –)

Honorary Treasurer:

Dr. George Gream (University of Adelaide) (1983 – 2003)

Professor Gary Bryant (RMIT University) (2004 –)

Association Awards

Two Association awards were introduced as the result of a motion at the Biennial Business Meeting held in conjunction with the 2010 Conference. The Peter Schwerdtfeger Award (at most one to be offered every two years) was introduced to recognise the achievements of a young Alexander von Humboldt Fellow while the Distinguished Member recognition (no more than two every two years with the exception of the first year) was introduced to acknowledge both the scholarly achievements and work for the Association by members.

The details of these awards since their inception and their respective criteria are given elsewhere on this website, but in summary the recipients have been:

Peter Schwerdtfeger Award:

- 2011 Dr Kathy Andrews (Queensland Institute for Medical Research)
- 2013 Dr Robert Mailhammer (University of Western Sydney)
- 2015 Dr Jared Cole (RMIT University)
- 2017 Dr Glen Wheeler (University of Wollongong)
- 2019 Dr Ravichander (RMIT University)
- 2022 Dr Christoph Nitsche (Australian National University)

Distinguished Member:

- 2011 Dr David Teakle (University of Queensland), George Bornemissza OAM (CSIRO), Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger (Flinders University and Airborne Research Australia), Professor Elspeth McLachlan (University of New South Wales), Mrs Mary Miller (Secondary School Teacher)
- 2013 Associate Professor Trevor Finlayson (University of Melbourne), Dr George Gream (University of Adelaide)
- 2015 Professor David Black AO (University of New South Wales), Professor Rob Robson (James Cook University)
- 2017 Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM (Australian Catholic University), Professor Allan Bretag (University of South Australia)
- 2019 Professor Kay Double (University of Sydney), Professor Jeff Malpas (University of Tasmania)
- 2022 Professor Katherine Andrews (Griffith University), Professor Gary Bryant (RMIT University)

In addition, during 2022 the Association received a most generous donation from David Pollard, Professor of Mathematics at Yale, but a former Australian Humboldt Fellow who graduated with a PhD in Mathematics from the Australian National University in 1976 and then held an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship at the Mathematics Institute of the Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany, under the guidance of Professor Peter Gänssler. Professor Gänssler's subsequent career was at Ludwig Maximilian's University in Munich, and he passed away in 2015. David specifically requested that his donation should be used to create a fund in memory of Professor Gänssler and to further the work of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. As a result, the Peter Gänssler Award has been created, the aim of which is to enable up to two potential Humboldt Fellows from the universities of Oceania, other than those in Australia and New Zealand, to attend the subsequent Biennial Symposium of the Australian Association and to be mentored by member of the Australian Association in the preparation of a Humboldt Fellowship application.

[1] "The German Experience of Australia 1833 – 1938" eds. Ian Harmstorf and Peter Schwerdtfeger ISBN 0 9588149 0 2 (Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, 1988) (Preface).

NOTE: Members, past and present, are invited to provide material that might be added to these records of our Association. Such material could be documents, photographs or additional information or amendments pertinent to the Association. Such information should be sent to the Association's Honorary Secretary at the address below. It will be vetted by the authors of this history file before being made available on the web.

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