VICE-PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

(Written by Mr. F. O. Nixon, and read at the Annual Meeting of Members of The Historical Society of Queensland, Inc., on September 23rd, 1948.)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I shall not be able to be present at this Annual Meeting, I ask you to accept my apology for my absence.

It is not my intention to offer myself for election as your President, but having, as a Vice-President, acted as Chairman since the death of Professor Alcock, and as members will be deprived of hearing that gentleman's customary scholarly address, I am asking the chairman of the Annual Meeting to read to you some remarks that I would have made, had my presence at the meeting been possible.

I need hardly add that my interest in our Society will not flag, and that the incoming President will have my utmost support.

It is a trite expression that "All our past proclaims our future." But it is nevertheless a true statement, with which few will disagree. The great value of the lesson history should teach us lies in following good examples and shunning bad ones.

While the best lessons are the ones we learn by actual experience, the span of the average life-time finds most of us near the end of it before there have been enough years in which to have delved very deeply into the distant past. Three score years and ten are but a span in a retrospect of the past. Hence it became desirable to bring into being Historical Societies to record the doings and things of our time, which will have in future years historical value.

If all people kept diaries in the painstaking manner of Pepys or of John Evelyn, who recorded in great detail the events of his very long life-time in the 17th Century, the world to-day would doubtless be much richer in knowledge of many important events and people, of which and of whom the world has no knowledge.

No thinking person can fail to be impressed by many anomalies difficult to disentangle.

In the generation in which we live, those who can look back over the past half century—and there are
many such men and women—are staggered by the ma­
terial developments, many of them so extraordinary
that had they been discovered or invented two or three
centuries earlier, would have earned for the discoverers
or inventors the penalties of witchcraft. Things that
come into this category would be wireless, gramophones,
aeroplanes, motor vehicles, to name a few—
radar and the atom bomb also.

In the same world—our world—one takes notice of
crowds and wonders why the human race has failed to
keep in step with the material development. So marked
is this that one wonders whether there has not been
actual degeneracy in the race. Considering that free
and compulsory education existed during the past two
or three generations, one cannot help being surprised
at the behaviour and the speech of the average man
and woman in the street. Many of us get some com­
fort from the opinion, if not actual belief, that environ­
ment plays a greater part than heredity in the develop­
ment of character from childhood to manhood or
womanhood. No one can deny that the tone of the en­
vironment of the multitude has been bettered out of all
belief, and yet do we see the response in character­
uplift that we have reason to expect?

Then we must examine the problem of heredity.
In Australia it seems to have had attention with aston­
ishingly gratifying results in everything but the human
race. In a century or so Australia has evolved a strain
of Merino sheep unequalled in the world. In the rais­
ing of horses, cattle, and other animals, where breed­
ing has received attention, as well as in poultry,
wonders have been achieved.

Applying some of these deductions to Queensland
history it is possible to compile a true story of vast
interest. What we owe to many pioneers is beyond our
powers of calculation. Thinking people in these days
must be lost in admiration of the men and women who
braved the cunning ferocity of the aboriginals—traits
not to be wondered at if they had visions of the treat­
ment to be meted out to them in subsequent years. City
folk who write complainingly to the papers, because a
holiday on a Monday compels them to eat bread per­
haps three days old, would have fared poorly as pion­
ners, who often went without flour for months and then
perhaps obtained some from which the weavels and
other forms of insect life had to be removed before the
flour could be used. To obtain water there was often no alternative but to dip it from a waterhole in which bogged cattle had died. Despite the sane precaution of boiling it could hardly be regarded as appetising, except by people endowed with the spirit of these pioneers, to whom Australia owes so much.

To write the history of Queensland’s development of primary industries would not be beyond the capacity of a sprinkling of people who are still alive. And what an interesting story it would unfold! In a decade less than a century since Queensland was created out of the northern part of New South Wales the growth of a population to a million souls who can live comfortably upon what is produced from our own soil and at the same time export enormous quantities of meat, butter, cheese, and many other foodstuffs, vast quantities of wool, skins, hides, tallow, and so on is an achievement from which we should take no small amount of satisfaction in itself, but for the vaster exports it foreshadows, if Great Britain still elects to remain dependent upon its dominions for food, rather than to transport some of the surplus millions of our blood relations to Australia.

The Queensland Historical Society’s late President, Professor Henry Alcock, M.A., whose memory those who knew him intimately will cherish for his lovable qualities and for a spirit in fighting the malady, to which he was doomed, up to days before his death, was never tired of stressing the importance of recording Queensland’s economic history.

To some extent this has been taken in hand; but much more remains to be written. In the files of the Society a most illuminating account of the development of the sheep and wool industry is on record. Many facts regarding the frozen meat industry of Queensland have been collated. In reviewing the vast quantity of frozen meat that has been shipped, and continues to be shipped, many people would be surprised to know that one of two Englishmen who were sent to Queensland to install the machinery in the first vessel to take Queensland frozen meat to Great Britain in 1881, still lives in Brisbane. No part of Australia’s economic history is more arresting than that of the earliest attempts to make it possible to send meat to the starving millions in Great Britain, while millions of sheep were being slaughtered in Victoria and New South Wales for
their tallow, and large legs of mutton with loins were sold in the streets of Sydney and Melbourne for 6d. each.

Of no less interest to Queenslanders should be the history of the dairying industry. Those who can cast their memory back about sixty years will remember the butter that came into town in the farmers' carts on Saturday mornings. It came in one pound tins with tightly fitting lids so that the oily mess would not spill. Then some alert person mentioned that a new machine called a "cream separator" had been invented. With the common characteristic of the average farmer of those far off days, who was often a person without a trade or calling that he could employ usefully—he took to the land where he might at least live without starving—he spurned the mere suggestion that this new-fangled machine could be of any use to him. To the credit of the Government of those days, which had faith in the cream separator, they equipped a travelling dairy and by ocular demonstration succeeded in convincing the dairy farmers that it had possibilities. The worth of this can be gauged by the fact that Queensland has produced 2½ million boxes of butter weighing 62,500 tons in a single year. And yet this is only touching the fringe of an industry that has suffered in common with other rural pursuits through want of water conservation—and the possibilities of water conservation has practically no limitations.

One could go on enumerating industry after industry that has grown from very small beginnings to ones of marked importance. Probably as time goes on and the vision of people, who in spite of common prejudice—but encouraged by dreamers like Brunton Stephens—is appreciated, future generations will have a greater reverence for pioneers and original thinkers, and write their names on the scroll of fame.