

The NEF/WEF in Tasmania

H S Payne

Mr H.S. Payne was a member of WEF in Tasmania for many years and its president for a number of years. In 1989, he wrote a long article on the history WEF in Tasmania and it was published in the THRA (Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings, 36 (4) p. 160. The following draws on this longer article. Mr. Payne was a lecturer in History and English and Drama in the Launceston Teachers' College/Tasmanian College of Advanced Education.

New Education influences were present in Tasmania as early as the late nineteenth century. One writer claimed that Tasmania was the only state to have a New Education Fellowship organisation in 1936 before the Australia-wide conference of 1937. However, Dr W. Oats wrote that its inception was in 1937 and that early records were lacking.

What is certain is that the Hobart-based Tasmanian section was established for the 1937 conference, Ernest Unwin of Friends' School its first president and W.T. Parker of the Education Department its acting secretary. Under Dr Oats and Wilf Asten, Friends School would be a major force in setting up the state-wide Tasmanian NEF section at a Launceston meeting in 1946. Support for the Launceston branch would be based at the High School there; the North-West branch likewise was supported by the High Schools in Burnie and Devonport. In time, the state sectional headquarters would alternate between Hobart and Launceston.

The succession of post-war conferences by international educators had a profound impression in Australia. According to two mainland educational historians, they were to have a more immediate and direct reform in Tasmania than any other state. They led to changes such:

- i. the establishment of Tasmanian Schools Board;
- ii. Tasmania was the first state to raise the school-leaving age to sixteen;
- iii. school inspectors were to become advisers rather than critical assessors;
- iv. teacher-training would be reformed and teachers encouraged to study;
- v. the Free Library Movement was supported by NEF and a state-wide library system would be set up;
- vi. the curriculum and examination systems were to be overhauled
- vii. education was to be progressive and life-long.

Every three years, these international conference visits kept up the momentum for change. Then, in 1974, because of easier global air travel, instead of lecturers visiting Australia and other countries, NEF members from sections throughout the world would converge on the particular nation chosen for the conference venue by London's international H.Q. So the NEF became a World Education Fellowship and Tasmanian delegates attended the Bombay conference in 1974 with Dr Madhuri Shah being the main organiser. Subsequently, Tasmanians participated in such international gatherings in London, Seoul, Utrecht, Sydney, Bombay again (now Mumbai) and even Launceston.

Unfortunately, Hobart's membership had declined for a variety of reasons and the branch closed down in 1975; also the North West Coast groups had petered out by the end of the 1960s. As a consequence, the Launceston branch based on its high school and teachers' college became in effect the Tasmanian section.

Its membership grew and it was able to aid an ailing Victorian section financially. It secured the 1976 conference for Sydney and invited Dr Madhuri Shah, the new international president, to Launceston where she lectured to Asian Studies students at the new College of Advanced Education. In 1987, the Tasmanian section became forty years of age and so it suggested that Adelaide should celebrate Australia's Bi-centennial Year by hosting the next international conference.

Since then, Launceston has soldiered on and in December- January 1998-99 provided the meeting place for an international conference at the Newnham campus of the University of Tasmania, and has initiated WEF re-awakenings in Hobart. For forty years, Launceston has held the Honora Deane Memorial Lecture and it is firmly established. It has recently set up the W.N. Oats Memorial Lecture in Hobart. These lectures are a fitting legacy to two outstanding stalwarts who put NEF/WEF on such a firm foundation that fifty years of outstanding educational progress has been made.

(Source: held at Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston.)

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