

History of the Canterbury Branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand

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For over 150 years the Canterbury Branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand has given monthly talks to promote science and the humanities in the Canterbury region.

There were about 17,000 people living in Canterbury, when the society first started in 1862 and Julius von Haast, the first director of Canterbury Museum, was also its first president. He gave a spirited address at a dinner for about 35 members, on October 2, 1862. In fact, he was so impressed with his speech he made a transcript of it available to colleagues, including Charles Darwin, who wrote to Haast saying, "I have seldom in my life read anything more spirited and interesting than your address. The progress of your colony makes me proud and it is really admirable to see a scientific institute founded in so young a community".

The first public talk given by the society on November 3, 1863, was titled, 'Thistles and their eradication'. It is testimony to how much science and society have changed that a public talk given by the society over one hundred and fifty years later was on the ethics of personal genome sequencing. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the society, a series of three articles, written by PB Maling were published in The Press during July and August 1962. In the third article, he cited an unnamed source that said of the society, "it contained the best brains in Canterbury and its interest in the intellectual developments in the Province can hardly be over-rated". Modesty aside, the Canterbury Branch continues to give well-attended talks, on a wide range of topics and also has an endowment fund to help young scientists travel to conferences.