

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
on Sunday 6th June 1976 at St Bartholomews Chapel, East Perth Cemeteries,

Commemorating John Septimus Roe

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It is an honour and privilege to deliver this eulogy of John Septimus Roe in the presence today of so many of his descendants, relatives, well-wishers and members of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society.

Roe was born on May 8th, 1797, just over 179 years ago. His birthplace was The Priory, Sandford (note the spelling), at Newbury, Berks, England. His father was the local rector, and also the incumbent of Dorchester, Oxon. John Septimus, as the name implies, was his seventh son.

He was sent to Christ's Hospital, London, a school where such famous men as Leigh Hunt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb were also educated. From the beginning he showed a strong aptitude for mathematics. He was an outstanding scholar, studying trigonometry, geometry, arithmetic, chronology and geography with equal zeal and facility. The discipline was harsh; there is no doubt, however, in the wide world, that he possessed a high IQ. Copies of his books still exist for our inspection; they show a depth of painstaking talent with draughtsmanship and calligraphy well above the average. At the age of 15 he joined the Royal Navy as a midshipman.

From midshipman to lieutenant was natural progression. He saw service first in H.M.S. *Rippon*. Then he transferred to *H.M.S. Horatio*. He was only twenty when he joined Captain Phillip Parker King on his long and arduous survey of the Australian coastline. His ship, the *Mermaid*, was a mere 85 tons. The *Bathurst*, to which King transferred after the first year, was 170 tons. Ships like these were to be Roe's home for many years. Yes, they were tough men in those days!

In H.M.S. *Tamar* (1823-28) he surveyed waters to the north of Australia. He charted the Gulf of Aden, the coast of Somaliland (Africa); Malaya, the Philippines, Macao (China). His nautical work brought him many encomiums from those in authority. His cartography was of a high order.

Several times, in these adventurous, formative and maturing years he narrowly escaped death. He was attacked by Aborigines; once he nearly drowned while swimming in the Kalgan River at Oyster Harbour, King George's Sound; on another occasion he fell 50 feet to the deck and was knocked unconscious - it was a miracle he survived that fall; he was nearly drowned when his small boat was capsized in a squall on Sydney Harbour...But Fate had obviously singled him out for higher duties elsewhere.

He returned to England to assume work at the Hydrographer's Office at the British Admiralty in London. He was 30 years old. Then, within twenty months, he accepted the appointment of Surveyor-General in the new Swan River Colony to be begun by the British Government on the west coast of New Holland.

It is interesting to recall here that he was given this appointment three weeks before Stirling gained his as Lieutenant-Governor. The two men - Stirling was 33 - were about the same age. Quickly they established a warm rapport.

Roe joined the good ship "*Parmelia*" at Spithead with his newly-married wife - the former Miss Matilda Bennett. No doubt you have heard of Bennett Street and Matilda Bay.

Through all the vicissitudes and the hard survival pioneering years Roe stood firm by Stirling's side. He was his right-hand man, a really tremendous 2 I/C. Stirling was to leave after six years. But Roe was to remain for the rest of his life to devote all his time and talents to a new land.

He was the man who made the plans and surveyed the sites of our original Perth and Fremantle. He named the first streets. He was present when Mrs Helena Dance cut down her famous tree on 12th August, 1829. He was present at the opening of the Perth Town Hall in 1871. He set aside the reserves for our Government House; for our Government Gardens. And among others, Kings Park, on Mt. Eliza, a wonderful heritage. Roe reserved this as Perth Park; John Forrest later only legislated for its keeping in perpetuity. He surveyed all the locations taken up around the Swan and the Canning, and even farther out, Toodyay (Newcastle), York and the Dale. He mapped Cockburn Sound and Gage Roads; he set out sailing directions for our South-West coast and north to the Abrolhos; he sited Rottne's lighthouse; he began Perth's first footpaths and arranged for its first Causeway. He drained Stone's Lake (which is now the Perth Oval) into Claisebrook. In 1835 he went down into the King George Sound area, and indicated the future line of the Perth-Albany Highway. He explored along the coast to discover Peel Inlet and delineate the lakes along the coast. In 1848-9 he led an important expedition south and west to eventually traverse the Phillip River area and east beyond Esperance. This was a journey of 149 days which covered more than 1800 miles. In 1839 he led the relief expedition to succour Grey's party southing from Gantheaume Bay.

Yes, he was an explorer of credit and renown in his own right. The Gregory's; Alexander and John Forrest were all inspired by his example.

For 42 years he was a pillar on which much of the administration of the Colony rested. He had been in the Royal Navy for 15 years; he was our Surveyor-General for 28. He was a member of our first Legislative Council. In 1864 he was promoted to the rank of Commander (Retd). Richly he deserved a knighthood. But Western Australia in those days was a far-off forgotten land.

He was the Foundation President of the Swan Mechanics Institute; later Perth Literary Institute and State Library. He was a founder of the Perth Museum. His own collection was its first.

His property at Sandalford still remains the only property on the Swan with which its original owners are connected. Rightly so, perhaps, because it was John Septimus who was the keenest horticulturist in the whole Colony. He had a scientific bent and much versatility. His character was unimpeachable; his conduct exceptional.

Truly we can say:

He was a great benefactor to the Colony;

He was a great benefactor to Western Australia;

He was a great benefactor to Australia;

He was a great benefactor to Mankind.

As he himself said: "I have not been idle in my generation."

His death occurred on May 28th, 1878, and his public funeral, with full military honours, was the most impressive ever seen to that time around the Swan River.

Roe once had hopes of Perth becoming a great city on the Swan. They were not realised in his life-time. But what of today or the future? We can look back on his aspirations now with both pleasure and pride.

His fame and recognition have been unduly delayed. Roebourne in the north; a Roe Range in the south; a Roe Parliamentary district and a fine memorial erected by the RWAHS in Kings Park. Little enough, surely there should be more.

But perhaps, after all, he doesn't need them. Here on ground which he himself sited, it is fitting we should pay tribute to him in our own words and also tribute in the words of that Good Book which was seldom far from his side, on the sea or on the land; at home or while on service. These were some of his favourite verses:

Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving and show ourselves glad in him with psalms.

For the Lord is a great God; and a great King above all gods.

In His hand are all the corners of the earth; and the strength of the hills is His also.

The sea is His, and He made it; and His hands prepared the dry land.

O come let us worship and fall down; and kneel before the Lord our Maker.

For He is the Lord our God; and we *are* the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.

The Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting: His truth endureth through all generations.