

Sir George Handley Knibbs (1858–1929)

Sir George Handley Knibbs (1858-1929), statistician, was born on 13 June 1858 at Redfern, Sydney, son of John Handley Knibbs, foreman, and his wife Ellen, née Curthoys. Nothing is known of his early education but in December 1877 he joined the public service and in January 1878 was appointed a licensed surveyor. On 2 January 1883 in Sydney he married Susan Keele James with Baptist forms. He joined the Royal Society of New South Wales in 1881 and was honorary secretary and editor of its *Journal and Proceedings* for nine years and president in 1898-99. In 1889-1905 Knibbs was an independent lecturer in geodesy, astronomy and hydraulics in the engineering school of the University of Sydney. In 1902 he represented the university on the board composing regulations for administering Rhodes scholarships and in 1902-03 travelled through Europe and North America as a member of the two-man commission on primary, secondary, technical and other branches of education (1902-06). In 1905 he became acting professor of physics at the university, concurrently with his appointment as New South Wales superintendent of technical education. In 1906 Knibbs was appointed first Commonwealth statistician, directing the work of the newly established Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics. That year he presided over a conference of State statisticians to secure uniformity of State returns. 1908 saw the issue of the highly praised first *Commonwealth Year Book*. Knibbs visited Europe in 1909, representing Australia at the International Congress on Life Insurance (Vienna), on the special committee revising the nomenclature of diseases (Paris), at an International Congress on the Scientific Testing of Materials (Copenhagen), at the International Institute of Statistics (Paris) and at the Geodetical Congress in London.

In 1911 the first Commonwealth census was taken, followed by the war census of 1915 under the War Census Act. Knibbs sat on the board reporting on the Federal capital site and was a member of the royal commissions on life, fire and other insurances (1909-10) and on food supplies during war (1914). He sat on several wartime committees and was a consulting member of the 1915 committee on munitions in war. He was chairman of the royal commission on taxation of Crown leaseholds in 1918-19. In 1919 he represented Australia at the conference on double income tax and war profits (London) and in 1920 attended the British Empire Statisticians' Conference (London), chairing the census committee. A past-president (1903-05) of the Society for Child Study in New South Wales, in 1921 he was elected vice-president of the International Eugenics Congress, New York. He resigned as Commonwealth statistician to become director of the newly constituted Commonwealth Institute of Science and Industry in 1921. Knibbs's indefatigable planning was rendered abortive by government economies and lack of initiative. His appointment terminated in 1926 after a period of leave of absence due to illness.

With ability and confidence evident in all his work, Knibbs won considerable prestige for the office of Commonwealth statistician, confounding those who had criticized his appointment. His major interest was in vital statistics and it was here that he won his international reputation. One of Knibbs's major

contributions as statistician was his organization of the labour and industrial branch of his bureau. His failure to concern himself with current economic questions, coupled with his self-assurance and didacticism bordering on pomposity, may eventually have rendered him unpopular. His written expression, however, may have belied his reputed charm of manner and unvarying kindness of heart. He talked quickly and quietly in a high-pitched voice about his extraordinarily wide interests; one interviewer observed that 'an hour's conversation with him is a paralysing revelation'. He was the author of numerous monographs and even turned his talents to verse; his descriptive works repay perusal for the detailed portraits they draw of his times. In 1928 he published *The Shadow of the World's Future or the Earth's Population Possibilities*(London). In his later years he embraced a doctrine which he called the 'new Malthusianism'.

Knibbs received various honours of which he was perhaps inordinately proud. He was president of the Institution of Surveyors (1892, 1893, 1900), honorary fellow of the Royal Statistical Society, a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, an honorary member of the American Statistical Association and of the statistical societies of Paris and Hungary, and a member of the International Institute of Statistics, the British Science Guild and the International Association for Testing Materials. In 1921 he presided over the social and statistical section of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science and in 1923 was its general president. He was appointed C.M.G. in 1911 and was knighted in 1923. He died on 30 March 1929 of coronary vascular disease at his home at Camberwell, Melbourne, and was cremated with Anglican rites. His wife, three sons and a daughter survived him.

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