

## Chapter 6

# One hundred down and more to go: reflections on the present and future\*

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As is abundantly clear, the Biochemical Society has come a long way in the 100 years since 1911, when one of the drivers for its formation was to bring together researchers working on the “animal and vegetable sides” of the emerging subject of physiological chemistry. Throughout this time, the Society has (with the exception of the focus on meat and veg) stuck to the defining principles laid down by its forebears. With over 5000 members, a third of whom are distributed worldwide and including undergraduate and postgraduate students, industrial scientists, academics and retired members, the primary aim of the modern-day Biochemical Society is to “advance molecular bioscience” which, not entirely coincidentally, is its current strapline.

The current activities of the Society are well described in the preceding pages, but 2011 has been a special year, marking as it does the Centenary of the Society. In celebration of this milestone, the Society organized a veritable cornucopia of exciting activities, events and meetings scheduled throughout the year and culminating with our Centenary Awards meeting at the Royal Society in December. Some of the highlights of these events have been:

- An exhibition, *Women and the Beginnings of Biochemistry*, honouring the achievements of early women biochemists in the UK. In addition to being the Society’s Centenary, 2011 is also the 150th anniversary of the birth of Frederick Gowland Hopkins, who won the 1929 Nobel Prize for his work on vitamins, was the first Chairman of the Biochemical Society (1913–1914) and also a powerful advocate of women scientists in the early 20th Century. The exhibition will be installed initially at the Society’s headquarters in Charles Darwin House, but later will be available to be moved around the country for future Society events.
- Since 2009, the Society has enjoyed a close collaboration with the Islington Community Theatre, with whom we have explored the societal issues surrounding hot topics in science through the medium of theatre. As part of this ongoing collaboration, the Society has commissioned and funded the production of a new short play written by a young playwright, Joy Wilkinson, which explores the potential impact of the use of stem cells in medicine. The play, *Little Miracles*, performed by professional actors, has appeared in universities and schools around the country as well as at Charles Darwin House.
- Another Centenary event that falls under our outreach programme is ‘High-Sci’, a series of lectures given by prominent scientists to A-level students (see Chapter 4; page 65). The idea of these lay-lectures is to enthuse and inspire the bioscientists of the future and of course to indulge in a bit of publicity for the best science subject of all to study at university!
- As part of our Centenary celebrations, the Society has recorded interviews with several of our Honorary Members, many of whom are Fellows of the Royal Society and Nobel Prize

\*This article is based, in part, on the author’s preview of the Centenary Year that first appeared in *The Biochemist* (2010) **32**(6), 46–49.

winners. The 'Eureka Moments' interviews record the recollections of Sir Tim Hunt, Sir Michael Berridge, Sir Alec Jeffreys, Sir Greg Winter and Sir Tom Blundell of the key moments in their scientific careers, the highs as well as the lows. These have been made available for download as 5–10-minute podcasts from the Society's website (<http://www.biochemistry.org/Centenary/EurekaMoments>) and they will remain available after the Centenary year. Apart from their value as an important historical and educational archive, the podcasts make for fantastic viewing.

- As noted in this volume, a major activity of the Society is the organization of scientific conferences and these have continued apace throughout the year, many in collaboration with sister societies. Two meetings have been organized specifically with the Centenary in mind. The first was a Joint Sino-UK Conference in Shanghai on 6 and 7 May organized by the Biochemical Society and the Chinese Protein Society, which focused on structural biology and drug discovery and was also a satellite of the 3rd Asia Pacific Protein Association Conference. The second meeting which will close our Centenary celebrations is to be held on 15 and 16 December 2011 at the Royal Society in London. This meeting will feature a key-note speech from Nobel Laureate, Tim Hunt, and lectures from all our award winners in 2011 as well as contributions from the winners of poster-prizes at the Society's Focused Meetings and Young Life Scientists Symposia held in 2011.

So what of the future? As the dust from the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review settles in 2011, it is already clear that budgets in universities and research institutes are going to be squeezed in ways that hark back to the darkest days of the 1980s. The following quotation captures my own personal view of the approaches being adopted by the coalition Government: "Such austere and rigid economy is altogether incompatible with first-class creative work". These



**Images from 1911, the year that the Society was founded: (clockwise from the top) Nanjing Road (Shanghai) during Xinhai Revolution; a British suffragette selling newspapers; Roald Amundsen at the South Pole.**



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**The cast of *Little Miracles*, a play about stem cell research.**

are the words, from December 1911, of Benjamin Moore, the first Professor of Biochemistry in the UK (at the University of Liverpool) and the founder of the *Biochemical Journal*. Scientific austerity is, it seems, cyclical if not also cynical. But how should we respond to such cycles in order to better position the biosciences? Certainly, making our voices heard by the Government of the day is essential. Our physics and chemistry colleagues learnt this lesson a long time ago as each discipline speaks with one representative voice through the Institute of Physics and the Royal Society of Chemistry, respectively. The biological sciences community by contrast speaks with over a hundred voices. In a bid to bring some coherence to the sector, the previous Chairman



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**The Eureka Moments interviews. Michael Neuberger talks to Sir Greg Winter about his role as a pioneer of therapeutic antibodies.**

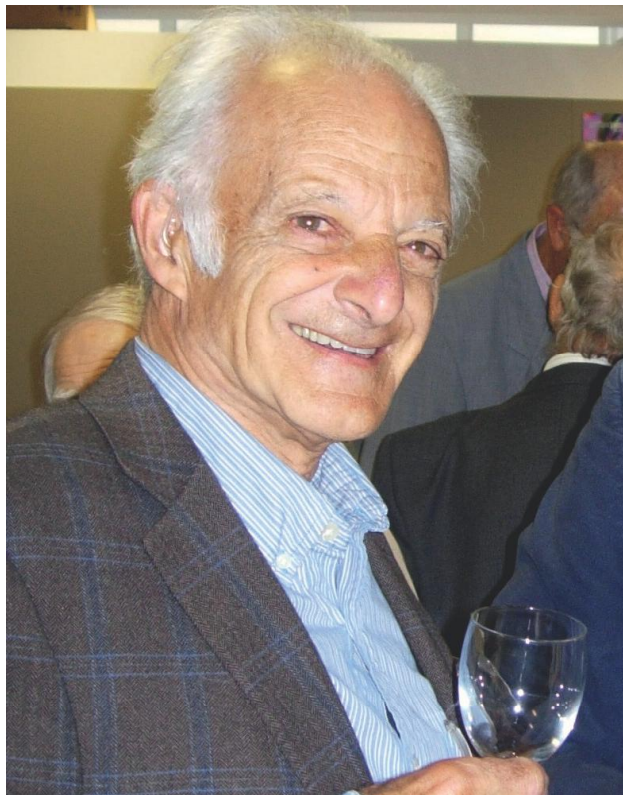




**Delegates and speakers at the Joint Sino-UK Protein Symposium held in Shanghai in 2011.**

of the Society, Martin Humphries, along with the Presidents of the British Ecological Society and the Society for Experimental Biology, had the foresight in early 2009 to sign a Memorandum of Understanding that binds the societies to work together in areas of common interest. It soon became apparent that closer working between the three societies would be best achieved if they were co-located and this happened in late 2009 when the three societies jointly purchased 12 Roger Street in Central London, now re-christened Charles Darwin House. A fourth co-owner has since moved in, in the form of the Society of Biology, which was created by the merger of the Biosciences Federation and the Institute of Biology in 2009 in order to become the unified voice that biosciences have lacked in the past. These four societies are working more closely than ever on a variety of fronts, including the organization of meetings, science policy and education, and on capitalizing on the economies of scale that co-location brings. Charles Darwin House is rapidly

becoming a hub for the UK bioscience sector and the Biochemical Society has been instrumental in bringing this about.



**John Lagnado, the Society's Honorary Archivist and editor of this book, at the Centenary Emeritus Members lunch at Charles Darwin House in 2011.**

So let me ask the question again, what of the future? Clearly, the landscape of learned life science societies is changing, and not just in response to the tough financial climate we find ourselves in, but also because the boundaries of our discipline are becoming increasingly blurred with every new advance in biology. For instance, where does biochemistry end and cell biology begin? Most bioscience researchers would say this is a non-sensical question since biology is a vast continuum ranging from the macro to the nano. Yet this continuum continues to be represented by a plethora of learned life science societies. The development of Charles Darwin House as a bioscience hub is, we hope, the spur the sector needs to take a long hard look at how we as bioscience researchers are represented. Biological research is key to the UK economy and to the training and education of our future biologists, as well as for sound and robust policy advice to

Government. With such a vital role maybe the question we should be asking ourselves is whether the biological sciences community is best served by being represented by dozens of societies? The Trustees of the Biochemical Society believe that a drive for greater coherence across the sector over the next few years is not only desirable but also essential if we, collectively, are to ensure sensible decisions are made by central Government on training, education and research funding. That is not to say we do not want and strive for a strong Biochemical Society. The vision of the Society, however, must transcend the traditional boundaries of the life sciences to bring us ever closer to other societies and the ultimate goal of speaking with a single, unified voice. It is for this reason the Biochemical Society will continue to be a strong advocate of the Society of Biology while not losing sight of its primary responsibility to our own membership.

As described in the preceding pages, scientific publishing has and will continue to be a major activity of the Society. It was a strong belief of those with the foresight to create the Biochemical Society that a learned society should publish leading, peer-reviewed research, and this remains the view of those now entrusted with navigating the Society 100 years on. The *Biochemical Journal*, under the guidance of the current Chair of its Editorial Board, Peter Shepherd, goes from strength-to-strength as do many of the other journals, such as *Biochemical Society Transactions* and *Clinical Science*, published by Portland Press Limited. The success of the Biochemical Society's publishing activities is paramount as these form the financial bedrock upon which the Society delivers much of its portfolio of charitable activities across the life sciences. Scientific publishing has undergone profound change in the last 20 years. In response to these changes the Society along with the Board of Portland Press Limited recently undertook a year-long review of publishing strategy, the first in many years. We are now implementing the recommendations of this review, which are aimed at strengthening our most cherished publications while capitalizing on new initiatives and opportunities.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to highlight the contribution of the staff at the Biochemical Society to the success of this venerable institution. Trustees of the Society such as myself are merely well-intentioned amateurs when it comes to the day-to-day running a learned life science society. The real work is done by the highly professional work force of the Biochemical Society who (among other things) make sure that: high quality research papers are published on time and with the minimum of fuss; conferences organized around the latest advances in our subject run smoothly and within budget; online educational materials and resources are available for schools and universities across the UK and that national events which reach out to the lay public are fostered and supported; travel grants, summer bursaries, prizes and awards are administered and distributed; the membership is kept informed of the Society's activities and are alerted to government legislation that affects the life sciences through a variety of media (*The Biochemist*,



**The Biochemical Society's Centenary Medal. Nahum Sonenberg who was awarded the medal in 2011 was the first recipient of the award.**

email, podcasts, the Society's website, Twitter, blogs); and, of course, that the events organized around the Centenary go ahead as planned and are well-publicized.

I am immensely proud and honoured to be Chair of the Society during its Centenary year. At 100 years of age, the Society is in rude health. Our members have much to be proud of and so 2011 has been as much about blowing out the 100 birthday cake candles as it will be about blowing our trumpet about the collective accomplishments of the Society. But the coming years will be a pivotal time in the Society's history. Molecular bioscience has never had a higher profile or been so important to the health and wealth of the nation. The Biochemical Society has been central to the recent changes in the sector that have helped to underpin public understanding of this fact. We will all be working to build on this foundation to make the next century even more successful.