

Chapter 1

Introduction

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When Chris Kirk, our Chief Executive, and I as Honorary Archivist first sat down in 2009 to discuss how best to update the historical record of the Society for the Centenary, we came to the conclusion that rather than trying to write a book covering the 100 years of its history, or emulate previous histories, we would limit ourselves to producing a book covering the last 25 years, i.e. from 1987 to 2011. This would be published in print with an online version being made available alongside a digitized edition of the comprehensive *History of the Biochemical Society 1911–1986* [1] that was written by Trevor Goodwin (Chairman 1971–1974) to mark the 75th anniversary of the Society.

There were in fact two earlier and detailed histories. In 1949, the same year that the First International Congress of Biochemistry was initiated by the Biochemical Society, R.H.A. Plimmer wrote *The History of the Biochemical Society 1911–1949* [2]. Plimmer, a founding member of the Society, had been Honorary Secretary from 1911 to 1919 and Chairman between 1922 and 1923 and also from 1939 to 1940. This was followed by R.A. Morton's more extensive *The Biochemical Society – its History and Activities 1911–1969* [3], written in 1969 to mark the Society's 500th Meeting. Morton, after whom the Society's Morton Lecture is named, was Society Chairman between 1959 and 1961.

I was initially tasked with writing this new history in its entirety – my suggestion that there were many better placed to do so was not seriously taken up at first. Fortunately, Chris Kirk subsequently offered to contribute a chapter on administrative and corporate developments (Chapter 2) and persuaded Ian Dransfield, the Honorary Meetings Secretary, to write a chapter on the evolution of the Society's meetings programme (Chapter 3), to which his predecessor, Brian Beechey, later contributed. My own chapter covers education, policy and other professional matters including the archives (Chapter 4) and Dianne Stilwell, who has a long association with the Society and Portland Press, has written about the development of publishing over this period (Chapter 5). Ian Dransfield also contributes, as an appendix to Chapter 5, an attempt to identify the most influential papers published in the *Biochemical Journal* over the last 25 years. In the final chapter, Colin Kleanthous, the current Chair of the Biochemical Society, shares with us his reflections on the present achievements of the Society and its future within the rapidly changing landscape it has been instrumental in creating.

Clearly, the writing of this book has been a collective effort! Much of what is covered in the various chapters is based on extensive mining of the collection of papers and records held in the Biochemical Society archive, now housed at the Wellcome Library in London (see page 70). Another valuable resource has been our thriving members' magazine, *The Biochemist*.

But historical analysis is not just a record, it is also an attempt to interpret, and it seems to me worthwhile reminding readers that the authors of this book, and its predecessors, are not historians. A proper history of the Society remains to be written from a much wider perspective, as part of a history of biochemistry in the UK, perhaps jointly by historians and biochemists. Or better still, by one of the growing number of professional historians (e.g. Michel Morange, a frequent contributor to *The Biochemist*) who were initially trained, and practised, as *bona fide* molecular life scientists. But of course, not everyone within the Society would agree there is a case for more history: "Science is about the present and future, not the past". (Discuss!). Some of the evidence from our own ranks suggests otherwise, *viz.* the popularity of the history sessions that were organized by a member of the Society at the IUBMB meetings in Birmingham in 2000 and Shanghai in 2009.

Finally, I would like especially to thank Sheila Alink-Brundson and Chris Kirk for their generous help and support from the very start of this book project, and latterly Kay Miller, our new Group Head, Membership Activities. Thanks also to several Society officers and members past and present, who kindly shared their reminiscences informally or in response to a questionnaire. I must admit to occasional self-censoring... Perhaps not surprisingly, emotions can still run high on events that took place quite recently or long ago, as Morton wrote in the preface to his history: "It was with considerable reluctance that I decided against quoting freely... but it is better perhaps to lose a little vigour than to stoke up fires that have nearly gone out".

References

1. Goodwin, T.W. (1987) *The History of the Biochemical Society 1911–1986*, The Biochemical Society, London
2. Plimmer, R.H.A. (1949) *The History of the Biochemical Society 1911–1949*, The Biochemical Society, London
3. Morton, R.A. (1969) *The Biochemical Society – its History and Activities 1911–1969*, The Biochemical Society, London