

---

# Recollections on the Foundation of the Canadian Biochemical Society

Gordon C. Butler

Division of Biological Sciences, National Research Council, Ottawa

It has been said that a person's memoirs should begin at Chapter Two. If I were to write a story of my life it would have ten chapters and what I describe here would be around Chapter Five. I have never felt the urge to put on paper any of my memories, first of all because I doubt if anyone would find them interesting (what might be read with most interest, I mustn't write) and secondly because I am not trying to vindicate any part of it.

However, Dave Smith, the Editor of this bulletin, asked me to provide some copy and I couldn't refuse him because he was the first student to obtain a Ph.D. under my supervision in the Biochemistry Department at the University of Toronto, 1947-1957. Moreover, in 1982 the Biochemical Society has been in existence for 25 years, so Dave and I agreed that I might tell something about its beginnings, not so much the minutes of what happened – which are recorded in the E.G. Young's book, "The Development of Biochemistry in Canada", and reproduced by A.M. Marko's article in this Bulletin of June 1979, written on the occasion of my superannuation – but some impressions of the atmosphere in which it came about.

I am indebted to E.G. Young for the facts collected in his book. At the time I wondered if his laborious compilations merited the efforts involved but I now acknowledge that all biochemists in Canada will be forever in his debt.

In 1936 when I became a graduate student in Biochemistry at Toronto, scientific societies, as we know them today, were almost non-existent. There were the Toronto Biochemical Society (of which I was a member 1935 – 38 and 1947 – 57), the Toronto Physiological Society, the Montreal Physiological Society (of which I was a member 1940-42); these held local gatherings to present

the results of research in progress. Each was very much like a club and seemed to fit the definition in Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary, "club" – an assembly of good fellows meeting under certain conditions". In fact the Biochemical Society of the U.K., of which I was a member 1938-40, was originally called the Biochemical Club. The Canadian Physiological Society in its early days also had this character. The meetings were small with an attendance rarely exceeding 50 and most of those present knew each other quite well. In those days travel funds were rare with the result that the meetings were largely attended by local members. Travel to meetings was by automobile and usually at the member's own expense. I well remember attending a meeting of the Toronto Biochemical Society at the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) in Guelph (an affiliate of the University of Toronto). In those days graduate degrees earned at OAC could be bestowed only by the U. of T.). G.F. (Guy) Marrian, my Ph.D. supervisor, took four of us graduate students in his car leaving in the afternoon and returning at the end of the meeting, driving through the winter night in an unheated car which was, however, full of brave talk and cigarette smoke. In those days people didn't worry about themselves or others smoking.

If one had a specially good paper to present he looked for a larger forum. The two most obvious possibilities were the federation of American Societies of Experimental Biology and the Royal Society of Canada. In 1936 and 1937 I had isolated an unknown steroid from the urine of women with adreno-genital syndrome and proved the steroid to be pregnane-3(a),17,20-triol (in the nomenclature of the time). Guy Marrian thought this work should be presented in a prominent place so he encouraged me to give a paper at the Spring, 1937 meeting of the American Society of

---

Biological Chemists in Memphis, Tennessee. R.D.H. (Don) Heard and I drove down there and back in my father's car. This was the greatest adventure of my life to that date. Naturally we paid our own expenses (about \$100 each). The meeting was held in a hotel with two simultaneous sessions, about 50 attending my presentation. E.A. Doisy was the only one who commented on the paper.

Later that summer Marrian thought we should treat Canadians to a presentation of the same work and introduced me to a meeting of the Royal Society in Toronto. I still remember the presentation in the north lecture room of the old Medical Building on a hot May day with the auditorium filled to capacity.

In those days when national scientific societies were lacking or embryonic the Royal Society filled an important role by providing at its annual meeting an occasion for scientists to present their work to a large audience from all parts of Canada. These wider audiences were due to the practice of the Royal Society to provide financial assistance to its fellows to bring them to annual meetings. With the growth of many subject-oriented scientific and professional societies this function of the Royal Society is no longer necessary and it has been largely abandoned.

Following the Second World War the Canadian Physiological Society that I had joined in 1940 for a membership fee of \$1.00 grew in membership and importance. Its annual meetings became more important occasions for the presentation of research results and those of us who participated found it a most congenial club.

I remember at a meeting at Queen's University listening to a fine paper delivered by G.H. (Harold) Ettinger; the audience was so small (not more than six) that I felt as though I were having a private lesson in physiology, an impression no doubt enhanced by Ettinger's friendly, avuncular manner.

I also remember a meeting held at the Seigniori Club in Montebello in the autumn of 1941. There were almost no other guests around and the four-dozen of us attending had the hotel to ourselves.

There were memorable conversations in the cozy bar and great fun afterwards playing hide and seek around the pillars of dimly lit lobby.

By 1953 the membership of the CPS had grown to 320, seventy of whom were biochemists. There were also appreciable numbers of anatomists, pharmacologists, nutritionists, chemical pathologists and practitioners of other sorts of medical research. Many Canadian biochemists did not belong to the CPS, accusing that organization and its members of representing only medical biochemistry; there was an element of truth in this.

The first biochemistry departments in Canada were in medical faculties and there they have found their most congenial homes. They seemed to do better than those in science faculties or as sub-departments of chemistry.

Another large group of biochemists was to be found in the biochemistry division of the Canadian Institute of Chemistry (CIC). These biochemists tended to be more oriented towards biochemistry of plants and industrial biochemistry. One group of these belonged to the Ottawa Biological and Biochemical Society (OBBS); they, led by Ross Colvin, Ralph Hochster, Dave Smith and Don Whitaker, began to talk about the need for a Canadian Biochemical Society.

Within the CPS, I and many other biochemists were quite happy with our "club", but some of them, notably C.C. (Colin) Lucas, E.W. McHenry and E.G. (Gordon) Young, talked to me at a meeting of the CPS from 1955 on, about forming a Canadian Biochemical Society and urging me to take a lead in "getting one going". Some of us wondered if there would be enough support for a separate society. Finally, at the CPS meeting in Montreal in 1956 the matter came to a head when we heard that the anatomists and pharmacologists were going to separate from the CPS and form new societies. We all agreed that if we formed separate societies we should immediately reunite as a Federation modeled on the one in the U.S.A.

It is interesting to recall some of those discussions in a Canadian context. We were repeatedly asked by officers of the CPS, "Why would you want to

separate?" and "What is it that biochemists really want?" I had two answers to these questions: "They want an organization in which all biochemists can feel at home with their own kind and which can

command their loyalty," and "As soon as they form their own society they will reunite with other biological scientists in a federation".

CANADIAN PHYSIOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY

*Program of the 21st  
Annual Meeting*

in conjunction with

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION  
OF ANATOMISTS

*Program of the 1st  
Annual Meeting*



Faculty of Medicine

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA  
Ottawa, Ontario

OCTOBER 10-12, 1957

Registration: Begins at 9 a.m., October 10  
in Main Hall

Faculty of Medicine  
275 Nicholas Street



COMMUNICATIONS

In order to complete this programme, a time of only 15 minutes can be allowed for the "presentation and discussion" of each paper. Speakers, therefore, may be granted a maximum of 12 minutes for each presentation but it should be noted that a shorter paper will allow an increased time for discussion.

Wednesday, October 9

9:00 Council, Canadian Physiological Society.  
Faculty Council Room.



PHARMACOLOGICAL SOCIETY  
OF CANADA

1:30 Registration, Room 30, Food & Drug  
Laboratory, Tunney's Pasture.

2:00 Tour of the Laboratories.

3:00 Symposium—Room 30  
Role of Pharmacologists in Teaching  
Therapeutics: M. Nickerson, (Chairman);  
J. G. Aldous, K. J. R. Wightman.

6:00 Dinner. Cafeteria, Statistics Building.  
Speaker—M. F. Murnaghan

8:00 Business Meeting. Room 338, Faculty of  
Medicine, University of Ottawa.



BIOCHEMISTRY

2:00 Biochemical Section, Canadian Institute of  
Chemistry. Symposium: Chemistry and  
Physiology of Fats. Faculty of Medicine,  
University of Ottawa. (This continues on  
Thursday morning, October 10th.)

8:00 "A Meeting of Everyone Interested in  
Forming a Canadian Biochemical Society."  
Auditorium (Room A), Faculty of Medi-  
cine, University of Ottawa.