

*Australian Biochemical Society / Australian Society for
Biochemistry and Molecular Biology
Golden Jubilee 1955 - 2005*

Over the 50 years of its existence, the Society has continually developed its activities and striven to adapt to an ever-changing world. There have been successes, dramas, perhaps missed opportunities, unique personalities with strong scientific alliances and many friendships formed. We have tried to capture the highlights of these 50 years – using archival material brought to life by the recollections of many of the Society's senior figures.

A fact all members can be proud of is that throughout the Society's five decades, it has resolutely upheld its aims in the course of its activities. These are stated in the ASBMB constitution:

The object of the Society shall be the advancement of the science and profession of both biochemistry and molecular biology by the maintenance of standards in the practice, research and teaching of these sciences by –

- (1) □ promoting, supporting and facilitating research,
- (2) □ facilitating the dissemination of information relating to research and teaching among professional biochemists and molecular biologists and students of these sciences by means of publications, by conducting conferences, seminars and lectures at local, national and international levels, and by facilitating interaction between Australian and international biochemists and molecular biologists,
- (3) □ advising appropriate government, industrial and educational bodies on matters relating to research and teaching in biochemistry and molecular biology, and
- (4) □ informing and promoting among the Australian community an appreciation of the roles of biochemistry and molecular biology, not only in the maintenance and improvement of living standards in both the Australian and international communities through its research contributions to agricultural, chemical, food, medical and pharmaceutical sciences, but also by enhancing the economy of the Australian nation through research initiatives and the development of innovative technology.

"I think the opportunity to meet all these fine Australian biochemists was a gift to any biochemist anywhere. It did one the world of good – and it inspired! I've never been to a meeting of the Society where, when the lab reassembled, there wasn't a real feeling of inspiration in the room. People were inspired by the meeting and just the contact with so much research biochemistry of a high quality going on. And I think that's a very powerful thing. The Society was much better than it ever perceived itself to be. Australians are not given very much to give an exaggerated opinion. But it really was very, very good indeed. In the context of being a teacher, a person who trained graduate students, and one who conducted personal research on a very committed basis – the Society played a huge role."

John Williams, ABS President 1986-1988

before 1955

AUSTRALIAN BIOCHEMISTRY IN THE EARLY DAYS

Early in the 20th century, Australian science was still in its infancy. The country's early biological science departments comprised only a handful of research and academic staff. The specialisation of biochemists from within departments of Chemistry, Physiology and Medicine began in 1926 at the University of Adelaide. Biochemistry was carried out in fledgling Australian departments located in our capital cities, each with a handful of staff led by one professor. Tony Linnane remembers acutely that, "Australia was part of a British colonial heritage. If you were good enough, you did an Honours or Masters degree and then you went to 'Oxbridge' (Oxford or Cambridge Universities). But I decided to do my PhD in Sydney, and I went over to the United States as a postdoctoral fellow. America was a good model because it had a proper training system rather than running PhDs as an apprenticeship. In those days, as so few people held a PhD, you would immediately be given a lectureship at a university in Australia. But many chose to never come back to Australia. It was extremely backward, throwing the pearls away."

Australian biochemistry was nurtured by increased funding by the Federal Government through the National Health and Medical Research Council and later, the Australian Research Grants Committee. It was also aided by the formation of a number of disease-oriented medical funds and by the expansion of the CSIRO. Geoff Kellerman recalls, "The great burgeoning in biochemistry began in about 1954 in the United States, particularly metabolic biochemistry and enzymology. It set the pace and standard for the next fifteen years or so, until the advent of the beginnings of what came to be called molecular biology." As a small, dispersed and geographically isolated group, Australian scientists battled to keep abreast with this application of biochemical knowledge to biological molecules. Keith Boardman reminisces, "we imagined biochemistry remaining a discipline which was very similar to the biochemistry as we knew it then. We felt it would stay a small specialty rather than the broad field it has become. The advent of the molecular aspects really took it into structure as well as function – making biochemistry and molecular biology a central theme in biology."

Given the small number of scientific researchers in Australia prior to the 1950s, the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) was the most appropriate forum for the presentation of scientific research. The aim of ANZAAS was "for cross-fertilization among the various disciplines and for communication between the public and academic personnel." However, as biochemistry developed and expanded in the early 1950s, one ABS member reminisced, "it was hard to know whether you went there to hear general lectures on physics, astronomy and road-building, or if you went there to talk fairly detailed biochemistry to biochemists!" Biochemistry shared Section N of ANZAAS with Physiology, and there was a growing feeling amongst many biochemists that a specialist Biochemical Society should be created.



Left: Frank Gibson (aged 18) working as a Technical Officer at the newly established Bacteriology Department of the University of Queensland Medical School in 1941.



Australia's first Chair of Biochemistry was established at the University of Adelaide in 1926 for T.B. Robertson. Pictured are Robertson's rat house for nutrition studies (above) and laboratory in the Darling Building (left).