

1955-1965

A NEW SOCIETY IS FORMED

Biochemist Rudi Lemberg fled anti-semitic Germany in 1933, and travelled, after a period in Cambridge, to Australia. In England, Lemberg experienced the value of the British Biochemical Society meetings. Lemberg strongly supported ANZAAS, becoming President of Section N in 1954, but he believed in the benefits of a separate biochemical body and promoted this idea. Hugh Ennor, Foundation Professor of the John Curtin School of Medical Research, also played a significant role in the establishment of a Society. He liaised with the Heads of Australian university departments in which biochemistry was studied and the emerging International Union of Biochemistry over the course of several years. After extensive consultation, the Australian Biochemical Society was established on 17 August, 1955 at its inaugural meeting in Melbourne, with Lemberg as foundation President and Ennor as Secretary. Initially there were 149 members, indicating a strong nation-wide interest in the increasingly separate field of biochemistry.

“ The Chairman then declared the Australian Biochemical Society formed and he thanked everyone on this momentous occasion. ”



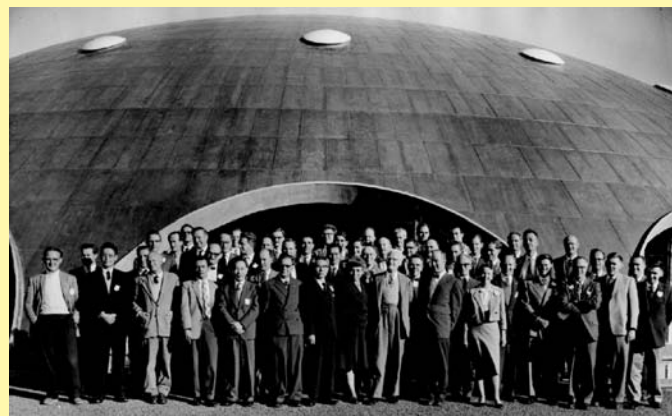
Left: Hugh Ennor.

Name The Australian Biochemical Society.

Objects The advancement of the science of biochemistry.

Membership All persons interested in biochemistry shall be eligible for membership.

Left: Some of the Society's original by-laws.



Above: Participants at the first international symposium held by the Australian Academy of Science in its new building in 1959. This symposium on Haematin Enzymes was organised by ABS members Bob Morton, Rudi Lemberg and John Falk and was cosponsored by the International Union of Biochemistry. Thirty of the fifty participants were from overseas and included some of the world's leading biochemists.

Below: From the beginning, the Society was highly active, as demonstrated by the AGM report of 1958.

Local Meetings

Queensland: Three meetings were held at which sixteen papers were presented and in addition there were three lectures by visiting biochemists from overseas - Professor Slater and Drs. Lederberg and Hamois.

New South Wales: A joint meeting was held with the Society for Experimental Biology of New South Wales. There were two guest speakers - Professor Slater and Dr. Hartree.

Victoria: Five meetings were held (two jointly with R.A.S.I.) with guest speakers Professors Slater, Geissman, Baird Hastings, Rimington and Morton, and Dr. Rogers.

Australian Capital Territory: One meeting was held to consider local activities and concluded with a lecture by Professor Ennor.

South Australia: Two meetings were held to make arrangements for this meeting.

ABS members enthusiastically ran many local activities, as well as the annual scientific meeting whose location rotated between the major cities. As it was finding its feet, the Society often held state-based meetings in conjunction with the Royal Australian Chemical Institute and the now-defunct Society for Experimental Biology of NSW. For a time, members of ABS had a dual affiliation with ANZAAS, and senior Society members acted as delegates to ANZAAS. ABS annual meetings ran directly preceding ANZAAS conferences, so that ABS members would attend jointly-run sessions. However, by the mid-1960s, as coordination and communication difficulties with ANZAAS arose and as it grew in strength as an independent society, ABS became the main forum for biochemists to meet and interact. Initially, the Society made a concerted effort to investigate the needs of clinical biochemists in Australia, in order to include them under the wing of ABS. However, the establishment of the Australasian Association of Clinical Biochemists (AACB) in 1961 led to a separation of the two branches of biochemical enterprise, and the AACB has continued to represent biochemists in the pathology specialty. Keith Boardman notes about the ABS, "it's been an extraordinarily successful Society over the years, something which one couldn't have quite imagined in 1955."

MAJOR PLAYERS IN THE SOCIETY

John de Jersey comments that, "over the years there's been an enormous number of people that have impressed me, and when people have been asked to contribute to the Society, very good people have accepted that challenge. It's important that the Society has gained the respect of the professionals, senior people in biochemistry and molecular biology areas, both in universities and elsewhere. So we've always had a string of good people who've contributed in various ways."

Figures who left an impact on the collective conscience of our interviewees included Rudi Lemberg, Victor Trikojus, Bob Morton, Gordon Lennox, Frank Hird, Keith Boardman and Tony Linnane. These members were acknowledged as key players in the Society and in promoting biochemistry in Australia. Echoing the sentiments of many interviewees, David Hume commented that, "some of the old guard were real god-like professors; characters we don't have anymore in the modern era because it's a different world." Geoffrey Kellerman reminisces about of the early days: "What an argumentative and combative group of people they were. They used to spend their time trying to pick holes in each other's arguments while the rest of us were trying to see where biochemistry might go. It's fascinating to find that my memories in later years are that things were much quieter and more pleasant."



RUDI LEMBERG

In his memoirs published in 1965, Lemberg remarks, "If I have, however, any claim to be remembered in my new homeland, it will be for the foundation of the Australian Biochemical Society whose founder and first president I became in 1955. The faith which I had in the vigour of Australian biochemists and the ability of the younger generation has been fully justified. The Society with its present membership of 400 is a vigorous scientific body and the quality of the papers read at its meetings is not inferior to that in much older and larger countries. I have ultimately found full acceptance in Australia; the most notable sign, even more than the honours received, is perhaps the Australianisation of my name into 'Lemmy'."

Left: Rudi Lemberg, ABS Foundation President, in the lab.

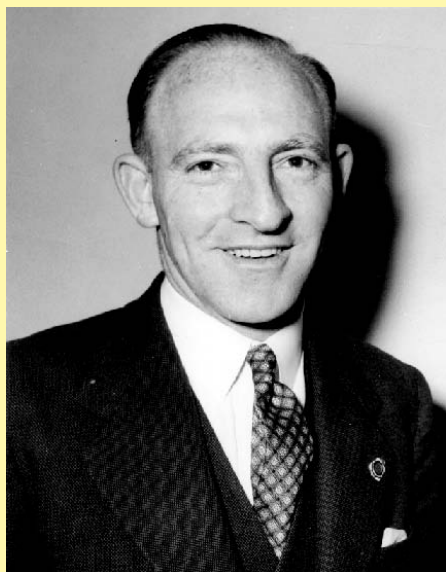


Right: Department of Biochemistry, University of Melbourne staff in about 1948 (left to right) back row: Frank Hird, Jean Doig, Phillip Scutt, Jack Legge; middle row: Nancy Hosking, Jean Dale, Muriel Crabtree, Audrey Cahn, Jean Millis; front row: Bill Rawlinson, Ivan Maxwell, Victor Trikojus, Joe Lugg, Arch Gallacher.

VICTOR TRIKOJUS

Victor Trikojus was the second President of the Society, and as John Williams states, "Trikojus was certainly the god-like professor of all time. He was very supportive and was interested in the well-being of the Biochemical Society." He adds about presenting ABS talks in the presence of Trikojus's colleague, Frank Hird, "If you made a mistake then heaven help you, he was a very tough character to talk to, but an extremely able and interesting biochemist. He would prepare his students for the presentation of papers in the most exemplary manner, which set a benchmark for many other supervisors to follow." Bill Sawyer recalls that, "Victor Trikojus and Frank Hird were strong supporters of ABS and contributed to the atmosphere of having ABS as an important, active arm of the Department at the University of Melbourne. As the biochemistry community of those days was still quite small, it was important to network as much as possible. It was important for young people to get to know who were the strong biochemists around Australia and attempt to form their own collaborations. And I think for those reasons they really placed ABS on a very important level in the academic environment."

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BOB MORTON

After undergraduate studies in the University of Sydney interrupted by active service in the Royal Navy (seconded from the Royal Australian Navy) during World War II, and a PhD from Cambridge supported by a Gowrie Scholarship Bob Morton rose rapidly in the ranks at the University of Melbourne, became Professor of Agricultural Chemistry at the Waite Agricultural Research Institute, and then Chair of Biochemistry at the University of Adelaide in 1962. He worked to improve the facilities, staffing, teaching and research in the Department. Bob was young and enthusiastic, holding the Presidency of the Society in 1958 at the age of 38. In 1963 he was making acetone powder from yeast and the lab was full of acetone vapour. An imploding Buchner flask splashed acetone onto an electric motor and the resulting explosion caused his death and injured a technician. Bob Symons and the laboratory manager suffered burns in dealing with the accident. As Michael Tracey recalls, "Bob Morton was half-way up the mountain and determined to go further. It left an enormous gap because he was an extremely active and competent man." The Society quickly set up the R.K. Morton Appeal, collected funds from members and friends and raised £2000 to set up two 'R.K. Morton Biochemistry Scholarships' for the best University of Adelaide students.

TONY LINNANE

Bruce Stone asserts, "The person who stands out as a mover in the affairs of the Society is Professor Tony Linnane. Professor Linnane instituted a number of things which were fundamental to the continuation of the Society. His style was not one that endeared him to everyone, but he was a man who got things done." John Williams comments, "There was a gradual evolution of the Society from its simple beginnings in the mid-'50s until the '60s when it really took off. Linnane was the most imaginative person and was able to persuade the Society to raise funds such that we could have a distinguished set of visitors come to the annual meeting of the Society. These were inspirational meetings and they were followed up then by visits by these people to the major departments so that they came and spent a day or two in the departments of biochemistry as they existed at that time. It gave the opportunity then for members of departments and indeed the graduate students to sit down and discuss their work with quite often the best minds that were around at that time. Australian researchers didn't go overseas much, cost was a big factor and a lot of people were establishing laboratories and really getting biochemistry up and running to a major professional activity at the universities."



SUSTAINING MEMBERS

Since the early days of the Society's scientific meetings, local companies would agree to support these activities ad hoc. This support was crucial to the Society's activities, and it was decided to formalise relationships with supporting companies from around Australia. Thus, Sustaining Membership began in 1964, and Bruce Stone recalls that "Tony Linnane instituted the Sustaining Members; their contribution to the whole enterprise of the Society has been fundamental." An Honorary Secretary for Sustaining Members ran this time-consuming portfolio until 1998, when the position was taken on by Sally Jay as part of her management of the ASBMB National Office. Clem Robinson notes, "one person who played an important role was the Secretary for Sustaining Members; the role was very much in the background but nevertheless it was essential for the ongoing welfare of the Society."

Originally there were 19 Sustaining Members, some of whom have 'sustained' their Society membership for the past 41 years. Today, ASBMB has a record 110 Sustaining Members. Philip Kuchel enthusiastically described the Sustaining Members as follows, "the exhibitions at ComBio meetings are superb and I was really heartened to hear one of the Sustaining Members say that that's the main conference for them. Their contribution to the annual meeting is a really important thing."



Sustaining Members Trade Display at the 1966 ABS Conference, University of Queensland.