

## J. H. Burn's Eightieth Birthday

On 6th March, 1972, J. H. Burn celebrated his eightieth birthday. On 16th March, 1972, about 90 former pupils and colleagues, and other friends, marked the occasion by holding a short, private, and not very scientific meeting at Oxford (Chairman, H. Blaschko) followed by a dinner (Chairman, W. Feldberg) at which Professor and Mrs. Burn were the guests. The purpose of this note is to record these events for a wider public, in the *Journal of the Society Burn helped to found*.

At the Oxford meeting, speakers described how their early association with Harold Burn had influenced their activities in teaching and research: Edith Bülbbring, a colleague who helped him develop the activities that made the department at Oxford so famous; Geoffrey Dawes and myself, medical students picked out from the class, and John Vane, a student from another discipline, all set on the road to academic pharmacology; and Alfred Spinks, who came from industry and was to return to industry to become a Director of I.C.I. Others present at the meeting represented various spheres of Burn's influence, and there were many, especially from overseas, who could not be with us but sent good wishes. In reply to the speeches after dinner, Harold Burn charmed us all by talking, not about himself, nor indeed about us, but about working with P. P. Laidlaw and learning what scientific research was all about. It was a memorable evening.

Those of us who were lucky enough to be taught by him in the undergraduate class or begin our research under him in the department at Oxford know how profound Burn's influence was. How exciting it was in the class to do experiments that really worked and meant something—small wonder that the course he planned became the basis of many other practical courses in pharmacology! How fascinating it was to attend his lectures, to hear him unfold, as he expressed it, an interesting story of the discovery and development of a drug, stories made the more compelling by the impression he gave of being himself passionately and personally involved in them! How irritating it was, after an hour's hopeless struggle with an experiment, to watch his pharmacological 'green fingers' subdue in a moment a hitherto intractable isolated preparation into instant and ordered subservience! A glimpse of those happy, exciting, and sometimes even turbulent days can be gained from the account he himself wrote of them (Burn, 1969).

Pharmacologists, always and everywhere, will know of the immense amount of work Burn has done, for they will find the literature sparkling with references to his papers. But some may not know that in many of these topics his was the idea that started it all. He was the first to introduce methods of biological assay in this country; the first to suggest (Burn, 1932) that adrenaline might be taken up into sympathetic nerve endings; the first to show (Burn & Rand, 1958) that sympathomimetic amines sometimes exert their actions indirectly, by causing output of the transmitter; the first to draw attention (Burn & Rand, 1959) to the role of acetylcholine in peripheral noradrenergic transmission. It would be impossible to list, in a short note such as this, all the other contributions he and his colleagues have made. But if you read his papers—and you are not an educated pharmacologist unless you do—you will find that the results they report are often obtained by methods of startling simplicity and directness. As he wrote in another context 'methods are good if they are accurate, rapid and simple, and bad if they are inaccurate, slow and need skill'. He has taken his own advice.



Professor J. H. Burn, F.R.S. (taken in 1949).

And if you do not always agree at once with his conclusions, you will be stimulated by his ideas and acquire an uncomfortable feeling that he may be shown to be right after all.

The British Pharmacological Society owes him a debt for his services over the years as Secretary and Treasurer, Foreign Secretary, Editor of the Journal, and now Trustee. It has already marked its gratitude by electing him to Honorary Membership. It now marks its delight at his entering his eighty-second year in such good health and heart by printing this note of congratulation. When he visits the department at Oxford he seems still to run up the stairs, though someone

has observed that he now occasionally touches the banister. So it is not only him that we congratulate, but also ourselves for having such a distinguished and exciting person in our midst. *Conjubilamus!*

J. M. WALKER

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